

Martin Albers

The Return  
To Delphi

(Symphonie Romane)

## THE RETURN TO DELPHI

1<sup>ST</sup> EDITION

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*For Tom Smit*



*Vita brevis, Ars longa...*



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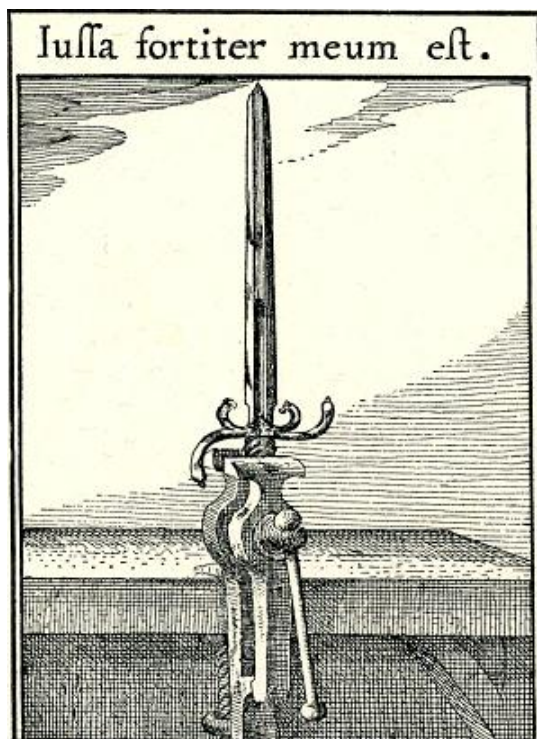
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*O Themis, show what art it is that repairs,  
Lost mankind, vouchsafed to help our sunk affairs.*

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## Prologue

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# 1.

## The Phantom of the Past

✧ Fermentatio ✧

*There is a terrible coercion in our deeds, which may first turn the honest man into a deceiver, and then reconcile him to the change; for this reason – that the second wrong presents itself to him in the guise of the only practicable right. The action which before commission has been seen with that blended common-sense and fresh untarnished feeling, which is the healthy eye of the soul, is looked at afterwards with the lens of apologetic ingenuity, through which all things that men call beautiful and ugly are seen to be made up of textures very much alike. Europe adjusts itself to a fait accompli, and so does an individual character - until the placid adjustment is disturbed by a convulsive retribution.*

George Eliot  
in: Adam Bede

### 1



n Saturday the 15th of August 2015 Richard McGregor stepped out of HMS Onley prison with a small bundle of goods stuffed away in an old, brown, leather suitcase. When the heavy gate closed behind him, he was uncertain still if he should feel happy or worried by his ill-timed release. After all, he had been quite safely tucked away in this British prison for special criminal subjects. The last three years of his imprisonment, however, had been a period of continued economic and political ups and downs, and now with social unrest accumulating again in Britain he felt a slight anxiety when forced to part with the safe, albeit dry, routines of life in gaol.

He was waiting for the bus that would take him first to Coventry and then to Oxford, and from there he would travel via Swindon to Bristol to call on somebody he had seen only twice in his life: the first time on



Madeira during a conference, and the other time just after his incarceration. His name was Michael Willmore, and he had been the instrument that had brought him to prison, but at the same time this person had appealed to the authorities that he was innocent of the crime he had committed. Still, Richard had come to realise that he was morally responsible for the death of two persons, although in both crimes the execution had been lying with powers outside his control. During his ten years in prison he had finally yielded to the idea that mere thoughts could kill. A dark blue bus approached, and stepping inside he asked for the fare.

"Two hundred fifty please," said the driver, a weary face, trying to look cheerful.

"*TWO HUNDRED FIFTY POUNDS??!*" Richard exclaimed. "That's nearly all I have on me!"

"It's quite a stretch of road to Oxford, mister," the man responded.

"Holy Mary!" Richard whispered and produced five crisp banknotes.

Then he stepped further, and his eye met the backside of two newspapers behind which two passengers were hiding, and he had to search for a bench that was still pristine. Most of the inside furniture had been mutilated through the workings of a knife, if not an axe, but nearly at the back he found a bench that looked inviting, although it was covered with a graffiti reading: "*Death to the Pocketeers!*". Another inscription on the right side read: "*Traders are Traitors!*" Richard raised his suitcase in the upper baggage rack, and opened his coat. From the inside pocket he took a little book, a novel by Somerset Maugham, sat down and started reading.

After winding through a few small village roads, the bus turned onto the main road to Oxford, and Richard's reading was repeatedly interrupted by brisk movements of the bus, the driver trying to evade some of the worse holes in the asphalt. Progress was slower than one would expect on the highway. After a little while, when the bus halted at a bus stop and one of the newspapers left the bus, he decided to go and sit on the bench that

had been vacated, so that he could see what was in front of him during the journey.

"They haven't been repairing these roads for many years, it seems," he remarked to the nearby driver.

"The last two winters 'ave left their mark," the man said, waving his head and uttering a sigh, "and the new government at least says they're working on it."

"Does it take much time to reach Oxford? At this pace we'll be there too late for me to catch the train. I still have to get to Bristol."

"We'll manage before six, I think. Near Warwick the M40 is already much better, but getting t' Bristol... by train...? I'd take the bus if I were you, especially when being short of money."

"Where can I change?"

"At the Oxford bus station, of course; the seventy one would be best. I'll guide you to the platform when we arrive."

"Oh, Thanks. Do I have to wait long?" Richard asked.

"Maybe an 'our and 'alf," the driver mumbled.

"Hmm. Maybe I can see something of the sites in Oxford still."

"The sites in Oxford? You're kidding, aren't you? I'd just sit put at the pub near the bus station and read that book, until the bus leaves," the driver howled.

"How so?"

"After six the centre of Oxford is pretty unsafe: all kinds of unruly folk on the move. And then there are these never ending crash-riding tournaments on the streets. No, no, no... Better stay inside."

"I thought these races had stopped already for a couple of years."

"It has become something of a tradition now over there," he said. "It started already in the 1990's, if I may believe the statements of my elder colleagues."

"Christ, help us!" Richard uttered.

"So, you've been in Onley prison?" asked the driver.

“Yeah.”

“A long time?”

“Ten years,” Richard uttered silently.

“Well, you’ve really missed much of the show then,” said the driver.

“Mind you, Bristol ain’t ‘alf of what it was before neither.”

“Yes, well...I’ve heard about the Cathedral bombing.”

“Who ‘ain’t... Are you staying in the city?”

“No I’ve got an invitation to stay in the countryside for a few days,” said Richard.

“Oh, lucky you. Better place to be, far away from the urban disarray.”

“Certainly hope so,” said Richard.

After driving onto the M40, speed was slightly increased, but Richard noticed that also here there were occasional piles of litter, with flocks of gulls and crows that were feasting on it, that had to be evaded and there were hardly any cars to be seen on the road.

“What has happened to the refuse dumps?” he asked.

“Full, or too expensive, I guess. They just prefer to dump it on the highway nowadays,” the driver answered, shrugging his shoulders.

“I don’t care about television, but I regularly listened to the radio news in gaol, and I can’t recall any mention of the deplorable state of the roads.”

“I suppose not. The papers and news are not what they used to be... and these liberal democrats use more and more words to say less and less.”

“How much is the fare to Bristol then?” Richard asked.

“Three hundred fifty or about,” said the driver.

“Gosh, I’ll have to visit the bank to get more cash.”

“You might just manage. Do you have a bank card?”

“No, and I’ll have to make a withdrawal from a Scottish Bank.”

“Oh, I see. That might take some extra time indeed. Well, if I step on it a bit, we should arrive before closing time at six.”

“I haven’t used my account since I’ve been in prison. They gave me a little bit of cash to get me starting, but I hadn’t realised the fares were that high.”

“With the present price ‘ises of fuel we shouldn’t be surprised: the fares change weekly now, about five per cent. I say, if you raise money from Scotland after such a long time, you may find that your savings aren’t worth a dime. Have you checked even whether your bank still exists?”

“It should be there still,” Richard mumbled. He foresaw problems in Oxford. He had sold his home in Washington D.C. in the year 2006 for a fair price, and had put all the money on a bank account in Glasgow since that time. There should have been a steady interest, and it should have about doubled his capital, he surmised. It was now of the utmost importance to get some extra money withdrawn.

“What if I get stuck already in Oxford due to money problems? Is there a safe place to stay?”

“Sure, the Randolph is probably the only safe place ‘eft there, although it will *cost* you,” said the driver.

“What does a night in the Randolph cost then?”

“I estimate about fifteen thousand pounds.”

“Blast!” said Richard, “I might get in trouble.”

“I think you *are* in trouble, mister. What if I give you a bus ticket all the way to Bristol. Then you can see to your money affairs in all peace and quiet there,” said the driver, with a friendly smile. He pressed a few buttons on his console, and handed over a ticket.

“Well, that’s mighty friendly of you,” said Richard, putting the ticket quickly in his pocket. The rest of the trip to Oxford he thus passed in a more relaxed state of mind, and it brought him through half of Maugham’s novel.

When the bus arrived in Oxford, the sight of the city centre was utterly appalling. There was dirt and litter nearly everywhere, and on the chalkstone masonry of some of the old colleges there was graffiti. In one

street, he discerned badly tarnished shops, and they seemed all to be closed. There was hardly any folk to be seen on the street, but here and there people could be seen in sleeping bags in portals and porticos.

When the bus finally entered the Oxford bus terminal slightly after six, there was suddenly a large crowd. Richard planned to withdraw into a nearby pub, as the driver had wisely advised. Things, however, turned out more fortuitously.

"I think you're lucky," said the driver, "The earlier 71 'asn't left yet. Better get out 'ere and catch it."

"Thank you so much," said Richard.

"God Speed!" the driver yelled.

Richard jumped out and took a little spurt towards the vehicle that would bring him to Bristol. Surprisingly, he found the driver at the rear of the bus with his head in the engine boot. He was evidently making some repairs together with a mechanic. This vehicle appeared to be rather old, and apparently it had an engine failure. Full of passengers it was too and, judging from their sour faces, they had been stalled for ages. Richard, however, had no reason to complain. He had his ticket. There was, however, an unexpected problem when the driver stepped in and started to cash his fares.

"Sorry, sir, but the ticket of Midland Traffic isn't valid here. This is a shuttle from Salisbury Traffic," he said with a snooty Oxford accent, quite incongruous for a bus driver.

"But I've paid four hundred fifty pounds for it," Richard lied.

"That must have been a very shrewd bus driver from Birmingham, who sold you that ticket, Sir. I, unfortunately, cannot accept it," he said, looking very determined.

"Look here... *SIR!*" Richard cried, waving his forefinger, "I've come from Onley and have been ten years stacked away in prison and hardly know how the traffic system works over here, and I cannot get extra money from the bank because it has just closed."

For a while the driver stared at his customer, and then he sighed: “OK. OK. Give me that ticket, and I’ll change it to one that is valid on this bus. I suppose I can have the office people claim the money back from that bloody Midland Traffic.” Richard handed over his ticket, and the driver, after pressing many buttons on a miniature touch screen, gave Richard a new ticket.

“Thank you very much,” Richard said.

“You’re bloody welcome,” the driver said with an uninterested look as if he was thinking: *‘No further concern of mine,’* and Richard thought the same.

He had hardly proceeded to a seat, when the bus took off briskly, and he nearly tripped. Luckily, he was able to swing himself onto a nearby bench, but in the process, his coffer hit a young lady sitting at the window seat. “Sorry, sorry,” he said. He directly put down his trunk on the floor between his feet, took Maugham’s novel out of the inside pocket of his cloak and started reading, trying to endure the piercing looks of the side passenger.

During the passage to Bristol, the weather changed from sunny to dark and cloudy, and then, at some point during the long trip, the rain started to pour down unremittingly. The bus went ever slower, with an engine that could break down at any moment, judging from the grinding sounds emerging from the engine compartment in the back. Richard didn’t mind, but he changed to another seat, when some people had got out and made space, because the young lady beside him had continued looking at him as if he was a deadly virus. He guessed that she might have overheard him when he had confessed to the driver that he had been just released from prison. She, in fact, made him think of the wretched Mildred from the novel he was reading. Soon, he was adsorbed in his reading again and, because he was a good deal used to it, he managed to finish it just before the bus entered Bristol. At half past eleven the bus passed along a huge, building of which all the windows were covered with black panels: Bristol cathedral. *‘Bloody Hell!’* he thought. *‘What a mess!’* He remembered the

events in this cathedral that shocked the nation three years ago, and during these years he had come to his own conclusions about faith and religion.

Arriving at the city centre, he jumped directly into a taxi, and instructed the driver: "I have to go to an inn called *The Prancing Pony*, and unfortunately I haven't enough money to pay you, but I'm pretty sure we'll get the matter settled once we're there."

"That's what they all say, Mister," the taxi-driver said, and then he hopped out of the car, walked around it, and opened the door to see to it that Richard would step out.

"Listen, I've been invited to this inn, as a guest, and I'm pretty sure the host will help me out, once we've arrived. I've just lost my purse," the unlucky passenger said, being economical with the truth again.

"The Prancing Pony, you said? You are a guest of Michael Willmore?" the chauffeur asked, bending down a bit.

"Yes, do you know him?"

"Of course I know him. There are always hoards of people from the city going there in the evening... *Invited* guest you said?"

"Yes," Richard nodded.

"Well, that's easy to check," the man muttered. He fished a mobile phone out of his pocket, and tapped at the touch screen. "Hey there, Michael, have you invited somebody to stay with you today?" He paused for an answer, and then he asked Richard: "You're Mister Digby?"

"No! Richard McGregor, *DOCTOR* Richard McGregor!" he answered angrily.

"Says he's Richard McGregor, not Digby... no... yes... OK, I'll bring him 'round." Then he closed the door, walked around the back of the car and seated himself behind the steering wheel.

After a little drive, which passed along the cathedral again, Richard asked the taxi driver: "Why on earth haven't they repaired that splendid cathedral?"

“Oh... I don’t precisely know. After this yobbo blew up the premises, they were at odds how to raise the money to repair it all.”

“They couldn’t repair it out of shortage of money? Isn’t the Church of England stinking rich?”

“Not anymore, after all those people leaving. There was a whole debate about it, but the city council couldn’t reach any decision with Canterbury. The interior, the organ, and the stained glasses are very expensive and needs special artists, and, for instance, ordinary glass they didn’t want.”

“So it has been standing there for three years without *any* use?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“I’m not particularly a church-goer myself, but when things get so far, it can only be called heart-breaking,” Richard said.

The driver indicated agreement with a firm nod and a little groan. It was even now a longish drive to the rural area south of Bristol, and after twenty minutes the taxi entered a very neatly kept area with old farm buildings. At a quarter past twelve there was still a lot going on: young people were lively chatting on a heated terrace, two taxis were leaving and there was a parking lot full of old bikes.

“This place generally closes at one o’clock, so you’ll be in all peace and quiet very soon,” the driver stated.

An energetic elder man with a short, grey beard stepped towards the cab, and opened the door. “Welcome, Mister McGregor! It seems you’ve been able to make it in one day after all,” he said.

“You’re Michael Willmore?” Richard asked.

“At your service!” the man said, making a little bow.

“I wouldn’t have recognised you on the street,” Richard remarked.

“Well, at least you look quite the same after all these years,” said the merry innkeeper, “although I seem to have remembered your name wrongly. Forgive me the small slipper after such a long time.”

“That’s no great deal,” said Richard. Then he turned to the cab driver and asked: “How much do I owe you?”



“It is eight hundred fifty,” he said.

“Do you mind lending me some cash, Mister Willmore? It seems I’ve been unable to keep up with the inflation.”

“That is understandable,” Michael said, “aren’t we - as always - merely following the example set by the Americans, albeit two years too late.” He took out some banknotes, and handed them over to the cab driver.

“Thanks, sir,” said the man, and he directly drove off, just when Richard had stepped out with his out-dated suitcase firmly clamped under his arm.

“I’m really very sorry for all the trouble,” Richard whined, “Let me pay you back once I’ve settled back in.”

“Sure, that’s no trouble. The treat is really on us. We’ve invited you over, remember?” They walked towards a little porch at the side of the inn.

“It surely got late. The trip took all day, and I’ve even been able to get through a sturdy novel.”

Michael laughed, and said: “I guess you have had plenty of time to read in prison.”

“Oh, yes,” said Richard, “but even after ten years there are many interesting things left to read. Hunger grows with eating, as they say, and there is still a whole pile of novels in my suitcase.”

“Great! You’re in need of a meal. I suppose,” asked Michael.

“No, no, I had a sturdy brunch in goal. Don’t bother.”

“Well... let me see you to your room then,” Michael said, and he pointed in the direction of a farmhouse, which by now had loomed out of the darkness behind the inn. When stepping along a meticulously laid out cobblestone path into the house, Michael said: “We have placed you in our oldest guest room, on the first floor. I suppose you are a bit tired, so I’ll make it short, so that you can get your rest.”

“Oh, you’re too kind,” said Richard.

They had stepped up the stairs and Michael showed his guest the direction. They arrived in a spacious room with a pleasant scent of lime,

and Richard was shown quickly around. The bathroom looked splendid, with an inviting blue bathtub.

Michael said: "We'll be closing the place down for the night in a minute, so I will be a bit busy. May I propose that we see each other in the morning at breakfast? Does eight thirty suit you?"

"Yes, of course. I might take a bath. *Ages* since I've had a bath."

"Good! I'll leave you to it then."

His host had left in a wink of an eye, and Richard directly plugged the bathtub and opened the taps. He sat down on the side of his comfortable bed and felt suddenly haggard and confused. After all this time, he had returned to the free world, and some emotions were suddenly set loose. A few tears appeared in his eyes. Soon, however, he stepped into a hot bath and hummed a little Scottish song that resonated through the bathroom:

*'Fair is the morn in flow'ry May,  
And sweet is night in autumn mild,  
When roving thro' the garden gay,  
Or wand'ring in the lonely wild,  
And nightly to my bosom strain,  
The bonnie lass O' Ballochmyle..."*

When he was drying himself, he contemplated his return to Scotland, but first he had to settle his affairs. As the sounds of cars and chatting people could not be heard at this location, a blissful silence descended upon him. After donning his age-old, but freshly washed and ironed pyjamas he tucked himself in, and fell asleep nearly instantaneously.

## 2

Richard was stirred awake, after a seemingly dreamless night, by a beam of sunlight shining through an opening in the half-drawn curtains. When he rose, he directly drew them further aside, and opened the window to let in

the fresh country air. Laid out before him there was a magnificent view of endless meadows with a few cows, with further down some sheep and goats, all sprightly guarded by a border collie. The scene made him remember his youth years on the farm of his grandfather, old Callum McGregor who had lived in Cumnock, but originally came from Skye. He hummed his favourite Scottish song again, when he shaved. *'Would Thea still be around?'* he mused.

He returned to the window for a while and then got himself dressed in a simple T-shirt and corduroy trousers. He put on his watch, which made him aware that it was a quarter past eight. He decided to inspect the meadows a little more from the small, lofty window of his room, and hereafter he left punctually at half past. When he descended the stairs, down towards the hall and the kitchen he discerned two persons having a peaceful breakfast. With a slightly nervous feeling circulating in his stomach - or was it the mounting appetite? - he muttered: "Hullo!"

"Ah! Mister McGregor," said the same bearded man of yesterday evening, "Had a good sleep?"

"Yes. Sound as a block. Very nice room, and very quiet. Thanks."

"May I introduce my wife," said Michael Willmore, "Sheila."

A lady with black hair, interspersed with a few strokes of grey, rose and shook Richard's hand firmly. To Richard she was, for her age, awesomely pretty and had a dignified air around her. "Please, Mister McGregor, sit down here. What will you have: coffee, tea, sandwiches...?"

"Well, tea and sandwiches would be nice," he answered, feeling slightly ill at ease. He sat down at the head of the table, and took the teacup that Michael handed over. When Michael poured the tea, Richard said: "I'm awfully sorry to bother you like this. I've not been in the free world for quite a while, and my social skills are likely at point zero."

Sheila and Michael gently smiled and stared at him. "Take a sturdy breakfast and a long walk," Sheila advised. "I suppose you are in need of some nice scenery and fresh air, after sitting in gaol for ten years."

“You could say that, Ma’am,” McGregor nodded.

“You never have been out of the red stone? Not even a little trip?” asked Michael.

“Sure! Of course I have been out... so now and then. A couple of times a year to the cinema or having a game of soccer, but ten years solitary confinement and daily jogging around the same green is not particularly stimulating.”

“I can imagine! Well, should I bake an egg with bacon? We have salmon sandwiches too. Will that suffice?” Sheila asked.

“Yes, please. Bacon and eggs would be fine. Yesterday I fared well nearly the whole day on those, sitting in two busses.”

“...reading a novel,” Michael appended.

“Indeed,” said Richard.

Sheila went to the stove to fry a few eggs with bacon, and after this they all continued eating breakfast in silence, peaceful for the Willmores, but unsettling for Richard, the sad ex-convict with so few prospects.

“When does your pub open?” he asked.

“We always open at two o’clock in the afternoon, and close at one in the night, except on Monday... we’re always closed on Monday,” Michael explained.

“Ah, I see. And you also keep a *farm*, I see.”

“Yes, my wife takes care of the farm mostly, and I’m in charge of the *Prancing Pony*. And we have some assistants.”

“I guess you’re a fan of Tolkien,” asked Richard.

“I was, yes, until I got my *personal* experience with the Ring.”

Richard stared at Michael in disbelief, and mumbled: “*Personal* experience? You are kidding, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely not,” said Michael. He raised his left hand above the table, a hand on which only a thumb and an index finger were visible.

“Good gracious!” Richard exclaimed, and he gesticulated in the open air, trying to find the words for a question.

Michael said: “No, my fingers were not bitten off by Gollum, but the Ring surely had a will and life of its own... like those *axes* had.”

“Ah, those infernal axes,” said Richard, looking bleakly down at his plate. “I never really have been able to forget them...”

“Well, they have all been safely put away,” said Michael.

There was an eerie silence again. Breakfast was soon finished, and Michael suggested: “I’ll clean up here a bit, and my wife would like to talk to you for a while... if you don’t mind?”

“No, no, of course not. I suppose I still have lots of explaining to do. I understand it must be awkward to lodge somebody who was the instrument of the death of a family member.” He then turned to Sheila and asked: “Are you angry still?”

“I’m not able to say, Mister McGregor,” said Sheila, “but after all the things we have found out during the last ten years some explanations may be appropriate. Let us sit and discuss for a while, shall we?”

She showed the way to the living room, leaving Michael alone with the dish washing in the kitchen. After letting Richard McGregor into the spacious room, she closed the door. Both sat down on a large, brown leather sofa.

Richard started: “Of course, I realise that I was responsible for the death of your father, but there were some things connected to it... unusual circumstances, misunderstandings, even mystical things, which I find quite difficult to explain.”

Sheila didn’t respond but stared away from him, blankly, down at the carpet. But then she abruptly turned and gave him a penetrating look. “One thing I hold against you, Mister McGregor: that you hung my father upside down from his feet in that cellar... or dungeon... with the help of your two comrades, and that all after some sort of Satanist charade. That was... was...”

“Unforgivable?” Richard inserted feebly.

"I have no words for it. Such kind of iniquity is above my comprehension."

"I'm awfully sorry, Ma'am."

"My father was very sensitive to such matters... rituals and such."

"I knew that, yes, but I really didn't want to bring about harm. Maybe a wee bit... for five minutes, but the intentions were quite different. I just wanted to teach him a lesson... so that he would leave me in peace. He was badly interfering with my doctoral studies at the time. But then he unexpectedly managed to cut himself loose and disappeared."

"Yes... so it turned out..." Sheila grunted, staring at the carpet again.

"But I'm indeed awfully sorry for all that's happened. Of course, I'm responsible. I hope you can forgive me."

Sheila looked at him intently and said: "Well... I am generally known for my forgiving nature, so we will not say anything anymore about this incident. After all, you've sat out your time in prison, so..."

"You're very kind, and - if I may continue with the *main* offence - I didn't mean to hit him with that axe, you know, it really was some sort of accident. Still, I realise I am responsible... also in this case."

"At this point I owe you an explanation, Mister McGregor. It wasn't my father you killed with that axe," Sheila said demurely.

"What?" Richard uttered, "but... but... I saw him with my own eyes. It was unmistakably John Armstrong."

"I'm afraid you killed my uncle on that evening, Mathew Armstrong, my father's twin-brother."

"Oh! Oh dear! He had a twin brother 'n all?"

"Yes. Not many people knew though."

"That's strange. My memories are a bit blurred after all this time, but I can recall he was in the company of Andy on that catastrophic evening. So, was Andy also acquainted with his brother then?"

"Yes, actually he met Mathew a few days before the incident."

“But if I didn’t kill your father, what has become of him? Must I presume he’s still alive?”

“He disappeared, on that same evening.”

“Huh? How could that be?”

“It is maybe a bit unfair that we didn’t brief you about all the facts that we, bit by bit, have come to know about the circumstances of the death of my uncle and the disappearance of my father, but on that particular evening in Lockerbie there had been a very happy get-together of my father with his brother. Mathew hadn’t contacted my father for more than thirty years. But suddenly, for some strange reason, he decided to return. It was actually Andy who found him, by a good stroke of fortune, at a piano recital in Leeds, and he brought the two men together again.”

“At his house in Lockerbie? On *that* evening?”

“Indeed.”

“Hmm... and there I was, chopping up a bus stop with an axe... right before his house,” Richard mumbled silently.

“So, you still insist, after all this time, that it was the *axe* that did it, not really you yourself?” asked Sheila.

“This axe was... an object from *Hell*!” Richard exclaimed.

“My husband will return to the matter of these axes later, Mister McGregor, but,” Sheila continued, “there are a few things I would like to know... First, about your affairs with my father. He behaved towards you in a way... well... it is difficult to reconcile this with the picture I have always had of him. Secondly, your relation with Andy Tielock also needs some clarification.”

“Well, that may take some time, but... if you so desire.”

“Maybe we don’t need so much time. Only a few things I’d like to know, just for now... So, you got into dealings with my father through a burglary. You advised Andy Tielock, who was your friend at the time, to steal back a certain book, wasn’t it so?”

“At some point I did, yes... after he himself had admitted that he couldn’t get it back in any *other* way.”

“What do *you* know about that book?”

“Not all too much. It was part of an inheritance, which came from Andy’s uncle Jonathan, who was living on Madeira. Andy had kept all this old stuff in his house for a few years, and among it was this book, a hand-written document with strange hand-drawn pictures. Only once I browsed it through, but it was in French and I didn’t read any French at that time. Andy was not really attached to the manuscript. He postulated that it could have been made by one of this uncle’s children, either his niece Claire or his nephew Robert. In the end, he had dumped it, with lots of other books, in an antiquarian bookshop. But then, maybe a few weeks later, he suddenly came across a book of an American philosopher, who had written a detailed treatise about this book; what was it called now...”

“The *Most Holy Trinosophia*,” said Sheila.

“Exactly, and through this Andy came to know that the book he had inherited was very rare: it must have been written by some mystical person...”

“The Count of Saint Germain,” Sheila again inserted.

“Indeed! So, after reading that book he was in all states, and directly returned to the bookshop to reclaim the manuscript. When he inquired for it, it had already been sold...”

“To my father.”

“Yes, indeed. Andy was very, very anxious to get it back, and so we decided, after some deliberation, that he might steal it back... I’m sorry, but so it all came about.”

“Well... that makes sense of some sort, but then my father caught Andy red-handed in the act of burglary, and instead of calling the police he actually felt pity for him, and then, later, they even became friends.”



“That’s correct, yes. He in some strange sort of way got his book back... and I was disposed of ... How do you know all these affairs? Did Andy tell you?”

“The part of the burglary I heard from my mother in confidence, just after it had happened, but the parts that relate to my father’s attempts to separate you from Andy, and all the things that happened in Lockerbie, I have come to know much later... from my father’s diary.”

“Oh, John kept a diary, did he now... and he wrote also about *Lockerbie*?”

“Yes.”

“How can that be? You said John *disappeared* on that evening,”

“That’s correct.”

“But... I don’t understand anything of this now: how did John disappear then? You mean to say he also witnessed that plane crash?”

“Indeed, and you chopping up that bus stop.”

“Oh... but I only saw two persons, which I thought were Andy and John.”

“It was quite dark, and my father was walking a bit behind, maybe he was veiled by Andy, who was a bit of a broad guy. Anyway, the fact seems to be that uncle Mathew came up front, attempting to stop you demolishing that bus stop. Then, after he was struck down, and you had run off when you saw the plane come down on the village, something very strange happened.”

“Something even *stranger*?” Richard gasped.

“Yes. My father was persuaded by Andy to drive to Glasgow, to the hotel where Mathew was staying at the time. Shortly after, John left England, and moved to Crete, to the place where Mathew had been living, and he must have been living there impersonating his brother. It seems he did this quite successfully, because nobody in Crete had noticed the swap, and he did so for many years.”

“You... you mean to say that he literally took his brother’s *place*?”

“Yes.”

“And Andy was behind this plot?”

“Quite so. As you may notice, it is pretty much as you said yourself. This affair is laden with strange coincidences, circumstances, misunderstandings and mystical things, but it reeks above all of scheming, deception, treachery!”

“Are you sure, Ma’am?” Richard stammered.

“The contents of his diary are pretty clear, and I invite you to read the diary too, mister McGregor. Still, at other places there are statements, which hardly seem intelligible. Although we have found out that some of the things described must be quite true, other parts must have been imagined, or concocted.”

“Sorry, I think I am not really so eager to read this diary. I feel already so bad, and I really would like to move on with my life, you know... try to forget the past. I’m thinking of moving back to Glasgow... once I’ve settled my affairs.”

Sheila shook her head. She wagged her forefinger before his nose and said: “So easy it is not going to be for you, mister McGregor. Before all things, if you want to move on in life, particularly in these critical times, you will have to put the past in the right perspective, don’t you think so?”

“Maybe so, but...”

“My father’s diary, and a number of other books, may turn out to be interesting reading for you. Besides, you need good references before you can find even the smallest job.”

“Well, there you put your finger at a sensitive spot, Ma’am.”

“I would press you to do some reading when you are staying here. You could start with John’s diary. In return we can give you a temporary job, so that you can get on your feet again.”

“If you put it like that, then I am very obliged, but...”

“No buts, Mister McGregor!” said Sheila, “Now... back to Andy Tielock: The thing is that my mother and I have never trusted him, we considered him as a treacherous type of person.”

“Good Lord! I don’t agree with that at all! I knew him as a very jovial and honest bloke.”

“You will agree that it is not a light thing to outrun justice, as you have tried to do, but for Andy concocting such a devious plot, to cover up a murder and make it look like an accident, and then to have my father turn his back to his family... that *completely* defies my understanding.”

“I must say I find this all quite puzzling too,” said Richard.

“Surely, Mister McGregor, after all the treachery and corruption we’ve seen in Europe, forgiveness comes easy. My problem is simply that I don’t understand Andy and my father. Why did they do this? I believe Andy made use of the situation for a certain purpose, and my father could not do else than get along with it. This is the thing I would like to clear up... with your help, Mister McGregor.”

“Well, Ma’am, that’s an awfully strange assignment to somebody who has just been let out of prison, and who is the initiator of all this misery. Do you have so much confidence in me?”

“Sure... and it’s Sheila, by the way, nobody calls me Ma’am.”

“Oh, sorry... but then you should start calling me Richard likewise,” Richard said with a gentle smile.

“So, will you promise to help me, Richard?”

“Of course. *Jussa fortiter meum est*, as some old Dutch bloke used to say!” Richard stated gravely, and made a small, courteous nod.

“Hmm... You have read Latin?” Sheila asked.

“Yes, a little in college, but I took the full course in prison. I read many interesting books from the past, mainly Cicero,” said Richard.

“Well, that renders you very suitable for the tasks we will bestow on you,” said Sheila. “If we return to Andy for a while; we know he had an

uncle on Madeira, and a sister living in Edinburgh... and Andy's parents died very early, wasn't it so?"

"Yes, when we were still at elementary school, Andy's father died in a car crash, and his mother a year later from a rare nerve syndrome."

"How unfortunate... What do you actually know about Andy's uncle on Madeira?"

"Only that he had visited him with his parents and sister two or three times when he was still a young lad. He hadn't been in contact for a long time, but then, sometime in 1983, he phoned Andy, and informed him he wanted to make up his will. At the end of the call he promised to make Andy and his sister partial beneficiaries along with his two children. First, Andy inherited a whole pile of old books and precious gems, a few months after the phone call, which he divided with his sister: he took the books, his sister the gems. Two years later, his uncle got bad, and moved back to Scotland. He was being nursed in an old people's home in Glasgow. In that time, Andy inherited a great deal of money from his uncle, because he had sold his precious estate near Funchal. By that time, Andy was already separating himself from me through your father's influence, so I can't tell you very much more, I'm afraid."

"So, his uncle Jonathan also had children?"

"Yes. I think they were... Claire and... Robert."

"That's interesting; that we didn't know. Do you know where they live?"

"I don't know, sorry."

"Do you know anything about the Rosicrucians?" Sheila suddenly asked.

"No. How so?"

"Andy didn't tell you anything about there being Rosicrucians in his family?"

"No, no, surely not."

"That's strange... He did mention it to my father."

“Indeed, but those people, like the freemasons, don’t really hoot their membership around, do they?”

“No I suppose so. So, after all these affairs with my father, you finally ended up in the US, and after many years - quite by chance - you spotted Andy during this conference on Madeira.”

“Yes... well... it was more that Andy spotted *me*; I even didn’t recognise him at first in his weird outfit; a fake clergyman selling wine.”

“You didn’t go there intentionally, possibly to see Andy?”

“No, no, I actually had forgotten all about Andy and Madeira.”

“Well, I will have to take your word for it, Richard,” said Sheila, “but I must inform you that - at least according to John’s diary - one of Andy’s forefathers must have been the founder of a Rosicrucian Society called *The Purple Rose*.”

“Oh? So, you mean to say that Andy named his wine after this society?”

“Yes, that’s correct,” Sheila nodded.

“And who was that ancestor? His uncle Jonathan?”

“No, it was some James Tilloch. He originally came from Glasgow, and must have been a botanist, possibly also a chemist, or alchemist... We only know that he died in 1756 in Funchal... Andy never mentioned him?”

“No. That goes back much too far in history, I’m afraid.”

“But James Tilloch did originally build that mansion where his uncle Jonathan later came to live. It was very close to where that conference was held that you attended.”

“Oh, how interesting. It didn’t occur to me at the time,” said Richard.

“And you also didn’t know that the Tielocks were descended from Tilloch?”

“No, no. I suppose there must be many Tillocks living in Scotland still.” Richard pondered a while and then asked: “So, this James Tilloch lived at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and was from Glasgow?”

“Yes, he went to university there at least.”

“I know about one Tilloch from Glasgow, but he lived at least a century later: *Alexander* Tilloch.”

“Oh, and who was he?”

“One of the editors of the *Philosophical Magazine* in London.”

“How do you know about him?”

“Oh, they had some early volumes of the old journal in gaol, in the library. Read some of the chemical articles. Rather funny stuff, really.”

“That is very interesting. Maybe you could dig into this matter? Maybe this Alexander Tilloch is related to James Tilloch.”

“Sure, with all pleasure. It wouldn’t be surprising if they were Masons or Rosicrucians. Many influential people were in some sort of elite philosophical order in those times.”

“Yes, who knows; maybe there is a connection there.”

“So, must I deduce that the manuscript of the *Trinosophia* had been all the time kept at the Tilloch estate in Madeira, and that it might have been given to Andy with a purpose?”

“I think that this is a possibility. For now, I think we have given each other more than enough stuff to ponder about on ourselves for one day.”

Richard could only stammer: “Yes, yes. I suppose you’re right.”

Sheila said: “So you’re welcome to stay with us for a few months, and I’ll show you around the place this afternoon.”

“You’re more than generous, Sheila,” said Richard, rising from the couch.

Sheila was already off to the kitchen, and Richard looked around the room, scratching his bald head, feeling utterly relieved of a ten year’s burden. He had been shown quite exceptional kind-heartedness and was greatly wondering what the future held in stall for him.

### 3

Later that day, at noon, after Richard had been shown around the premises, he had been strolling on the farmlands a little further, ending up

on a small bench on a pontoon at the side of a small stream. He was reflecting long on the new, weird information of his hostess, and what his possible commission would turn out to be. Soon he was joined by Michael Willmore, his friendly host, who sat down on the opposite bench.

“A pretty nice dwelling you have here,” Richard commented. “Lots of farmland.”

“Yes, we’ve been very lucky,” Michael nodded.

“The water looks good too. I assume you can have a nice swim.”

“Yes, especially my wife likes to splash around here, and keep up her condition. This platform is a copy of the one she had at her parents’ home, in Muirkirk, at the river Ayr.”

“Ah, but that is a very, very cold stream, that one... Your wife is interesting. Have I missed something about the Scottish, do they all have such a forgiving nature?”

“If *you* don’t know, I really wouldn’t be able to say either.”

“I lively remember Kerry MacAskill’s gesture to return this Lockerbie bomber, Al-Megrahi, to Libya, when he was diagnosed fatally ill. I got the impression the Scottish set humanitarian values very high... even *above* Justice?”

“Maybe, but at that time the case against Megrahi looked very feeble in the eyes of international justice. Now it seems the evidence against him has eroded away almost completely. Still, he’s now three years dead already.”

“Blimey! I spent more time in goal than him. At the time I felt quite sore about it,” Richard roared.

“I understand your predicament all too well,” Michael nodded.

“Have there been any further clues about who planned the Lockerbie bombing? There were so many conflicting messages in the news.”

“I’d better not go into all those rumours. Benji Miller said there was a great deal of camouflage, and there is nothing definitively known. Meanwhile the covert actions just continue. Gaddafi’s papers that were retrieved from his palace in 2011 and were under investigation in London

have mysteriously disappeared. However, Abu Nidal was implicated as the prime suspect a number of times.”

Richard nodded. “I suppose Abu Nidal must have been a bit too much even for Gaddafi in the end.”

“Yes, Benji Miller said that Abu Nidal was kicked out of Syria due to his involvement in the Hindawi affair, and likely a similar thing happened in Libya over the Lockerbie affair. Allegedly, he had some role in the construction of the bomb, and for some reason Gaddafi decided to kick him out of the country. Abu Nidal then took refuge in Egypt and later went to Iraq to spy on behalf of Kuwait and Egypt to find out if Saddam Hussein had any connections with El-Qaida. Of course this looks rather implausible. Anyway, it was the Iraqi’s who killed him in the end.”

“It seems you have been following the developments. So, you have kept in touch with Superintendent Benjamin Miller all these years?”

“Oh yes! We visit him sometimes when we are in Funchal. He spends his pension years there.”

“Well, he really got me trapped ten years ago,” Richard said.

“As you know, I tried to appeal to the court in your case, but the evidence was withheld. I wasn’t even *allowed* to give evidence,” said Michael.

“Well... I was *sent to Coventry* as they use to say. I won’t be sour about it. In the end, the time in goal was well spent,” Richard said, “but doesn’t your wife find my visit here at all problematic?”

“I think we both have understood your predicament. As it comes to Sheila, when there is something she can’t follow, can’t grasp, it won’t leave her in peace. This case of Andy and her father has puzzled her now for ten years, and she is still eager to have it all cleared up.” Michael explained.

“Yeah, she even asked *my* help,” Richard said.

“Of course! You have a key role in it, and have known Andy, so...”



“All the same, your wife is quite exceptional, and I’m a bit bewildered by your friendly reception. Still, is your wife really as Scottish as she likes to pretend?” said Richard, with a shade of mockery in his voice.

“As you must have known, she is not of Scottish birth, but she grew up in Ayrshire on the Moorlands. So, at least I have regarded her always as Scottish.”

“Well, you may praise yourself lucky.”

“Hmm... You never got married yourself?” Michael asked.

“Science came first, I’m afraid.”

“I had already such an impression.”

“There is somebody I used to date though... in Glasgow,” said Richard.

“A girlfriend, you mean?”

“Yes, but then I fled to the US, and I lost her.”

“That is sad, Richard.”

Richard stared at Michael’s truncated left hand, and asked: “I remember you had your hand all wrapped up when you visited me in goal ten years ago.”

“Yes, time certainly flies, doesn’t it?”

“Not for me, really. Is that handicap really due to the Ring?”

“Some sort of magic ring it was, yes. I found it on Madeira, and put it on my finger for a few months, when, in the end, it appeared to be slightly radioactive. I had acquired minor radiation damage, so they decided to amputate, just to be on the safe side. I kept it all hush, hush, of course.”

“Gosh, that’s a rather bizarre precaution.”

“Well, I’m used to getting around with two fingers now. Not such a problem.”

There was a short, devout silence, and then Richard remarked: “You were then also very anxious to get hold of that second axe. Did you actually find it?”

"It was as you said: Freddy Smith had it stacked safely away. He had taken it from the house of your friend George."

"So, must I presume that Freddy severed George's hand with it?"

"I don't know, I didn't ask," said Michael staring at the sky.

"Why not?"

"I wanted his cooperation in finding the axe, not to get him to court."

"Ah, well, maybe you were right. Those axes were bloody dangerous."

"I know, I had also a personal experience with the other one which was rather startling," Michael muttered.

"But... did Freddy actually hand it over to you without any protest?"

"Yes, he did! In fact, he was quite happy to get rid of it. He had it hidden in that church in Mauchline."

"Oh, *there*... of all places... and, what did you do with it?"

"Brought it back to where you dug it up... in Syria. *Both* axes."

"Oh, yes... now I remember you also wanted to know precisely where we found them. But... how did you get hold of the other one? Wasn't it kept by the police in Funchal?"

"They intended to return it to the Marriot hotel, but Marco Ferraris intercepted it and sent it to me from Madeira."

"He stole a piece of evidence?"

"What do you mean? It was the lawful property of the Marriot hotel in Funchal. It was to be returned to that sumptuous establishment."

"Do you say that, after all that happened, there was not even *any* investigation? Not even into Andy's assault on *me*?"

"Andy killed himself... and the axe missed you anyway, so it was not needed as evidence, really."

"But it did a hell of a lot of harm; surely it should have been used as evidence."

"Maybe I could have tried to convince the authorities that this axe - all out of itself - chopped up a bus stop and butchered an English Cretan in Lockerbie in the year 1988, then travelled to Funchal, Madeira, where, in

2005, it surfaced trying to butcher a British citizen in the Marriot hotel, and – to top it off – chopped up a Revox reel-to-reel tape recorder in the police station, but I’m afraid that in the most favourable case they would have heartily laughed, saying: *‘I dear say, what a naughty axe, let’s put it in the furnace!’* No, no, no, more likely I would have been chased by a hoard of men-in-white through the streets of Funchal, all trying to stuff me away in a pink room with soft walls.”

Richard chuckled: “Chopped up a tape recorder...?”

“I’m sorry, Richard, but I refuse to remember this particular incident.”

“OK. Have it your way, but how did you actually get these axes safely reburied, all the way in Syria in the middle of *nowhere*?”

“With a friend of mine; we carefully wrapped them up and smuggled them into Syria. I knew the captain of a Spanish freighter, and he didn’t ask questions. After some daunting navigation work in the Syrian desert, we finally managed to find this old tree trunk back, and dug deep enough to ensure that they will not be found back for quite some time.”

“Ah, yes, well... it was the only reasonable thing you could do, I suppose. These axes were almost *alive*.”

“So that ring was too.”

“You make it almost sound as if they were belonging together.”

“They were at least forged from the same material, something the ancients called *Electrum*, some sort of fake gold.”

“Do you think these axes were also radioactive?”

“Might have been, but I’m quite sure this material has not been earlier known, and it certainly needs some further investigation. In fact, we have in our possession a whole range of artefacts that are strange. The Ring definitively was the most dangerous, at least if I’m to believe the ancient sources.”

“What did you do with it then?”

“Cast it in lead and stored it safely in a depot for chemical waste at my working place.”

“Gosh, what a shame!”

“Well, Richard, there wasn’t much else I could do.”

“You could have safely donated it to the Ashmolean collection of finger rings,” Richard jested. Michael looked sour, and Richard asked: “So, what did it look like?”

“It was in the shape of a serpent biting its own tail.”

“Oh, that rings a bell... where from would such artefacts have originated?”

“We guess they are from ancient Ethiopia, forged about sixty thousand years ago, as I could make up from the Nickel isotope.”

“Such a long time ago? And do you have any idea what these objects were used for?”

“We don’t know for certain. They were likely just votive offerings, but they could also have been used in ancient temples for administering justice or sacred rites, or maybe ancient tools of divine instruction.”

“Divine instruction, hmm... at least I remember Andy said the axe was an instrument of *vengeance*.”

“Well, if this would be true it is rather peculiar that it missed you.”

“I just ducked,” said Richard, shrugging his shoulders.

“All the same; after all that I’ve heard about these axes and what I’ve experienced they were rather infallible in their execution. I got also the impression that they were in ancient times yielded by women.”

“You mean a high priestess of some sort?”

“Possibly, but nowadays they must be considered obsolete and dangerous, particularly this ring.”

“So, if you say tools of divine instruction, what kind of instruction was that?”

“Tutoring in husbandry and before all implanting in Man the desire to create.”

“Create... you mean the Arts?”

“Yes, handicraft, art, science...”

“Hmm... have you suddenly become some sort of creationist? I thought you adhered to the RNA-world hypothesis?”

“How do you mean?”

“I remember you hinted at this in your lecture in Madeira, and proposed that the first genes were formed on sand grains on the beach, by a solid-phase synthesis process controlled by the sun and the moon... that is, by the effects of sunlight and the tide.”

“Well! You truly have an excellent memory, Richard. But that was related to the creation of the first gene-like compounds, not the creation of intelligent life and culture, and I only used it to pickle my presentation.”

“OK, but your idea definitively appealed to me at the time, after all the things I studied in gene expression. For some time the RNA-world hypothesis was very popular, although it didn’t mention anything about the grains of sand and the solid-phase synthesis part.”

“Believe it or not, but it is nearly literally written so in the *Corpus Hermeticum* in the third tractate, the *Sacred Sermon*.”

“Really? So, you took this part from ancient writings, and just hung it conveniently onto the RNA-world hypothesis, is that it?”

“Maybe you could put it like that, yes, but in the light of recently published scientific studies I wasn’t too far off.”

“Well,” said Richard, “I have to admit that since earlier days I have also changed my views into creationist directions, particularly when we shifted our attention from molecular biology to systems biology. Still, when you say *instruction*: Who was instructing whom?”

“In this respect we will have to let you in to a little secret,” said Michael, and he crouched a bit closer to Richard on the opposite bench.

“Oh?” Richard uttered, and straightened his back.

“Ever heard of Democritus?”

“Of course! He was the Greek bloke who coined the atomic theory, together with Leucippus.”

“Exactly! We have come across some ancient documents of his hand that prove he was some sort of alchemist. In his writings he recalls his studies under Lord Hermes III, who was the direct descendent of the Egyptian God Thoth.”

“Ah! Do you imply that Democritus is the author of the Corpus Hermeticum?”

“No. The thing is a bit more complicated. We only found two of his papyri, and they briefly mention that he had penned down, already quite long ago, the introductory sermons of Hermes III. These were the parts that were taught to everybody for free. However, his report of these teachings is missing.”

“Oh. What a pity.”

“Indeed! However, he also mentions Manetos, one of his fellow students at the time, as the translator of the *secret* Hermetic teachings, which clearly must have come down to us as the Corpus Hermeticum.”

“So, the public, general introduction to the Hermetic teachings is missing, but the secret ones we all have in the form of the Corpus Hermeticum? Is that what you are saying?”

“Yes. We know for sure that the two scrolls we have are part of a set of five, because Democritus refers many times to his earlier epistles, but these are now lost.”

“So... this implies that the Corpus Hermeticum was written *before* the Christian era?”

“Yes, even slightly before the *Ptolemaic* era.”

“Where have you found those papers?”

“We’ll come to that in a moment, Richard. First I should return to the writings of Democritus. The last two of his papyruses describe his travels to the East. It starts with him taking off to Sardis, as it seems by commission of the Pythia at Delphi, whom he had visited and had consulted on the fall of Greece and the fate of Mankind. The Pythia has no direct answer, but orders him to look for the cist of Cybele, which

allegedly was destroyed in Sardis by the Etruscans. He roams long through the orient with a large group of companions, looking for the tomb of Cybele, and finally finds it in Eridu in Persia. Dutifully he then brings it to Delphi and pays his helpers. They also have a big celebration at the instigation of the Pythia.”

“Hmm... what a peculiar story!” Richard said.

“Yes, and it got even more peculiar! After the celebrations Democritus’ friends leave, and the next day the Pythia receives him in the Adyton, where they open the cist. They find a well-preserved mummy which has two heads, joined to a body that is at the end more like the bark of a tree. Democritus complains that this is a serious violation, but the Pythia tells him that the remains are actually those of the ancient Titan Mnemosyne, and that the Ring he carries, Abraxyne, is her antagonist. Democritus is highly surprised that the Pythia somehow seems to know about the Ring, which he had received from his pupil Hippocrates, and had secretly carried with him on his travels. The Pythia then asks him to show the Ring to her. Without further thought he takes it out of his pocket, and then the Pythia does something utterly inexplicable: out of the mouth of one of the heads of the mummy she removes three seeds, and fits the Ring around them. Then she puts the Ring and the seeds back into the mouth of the mummy. She says: *Let us trap Abraxyne for a while in its own bait*. Democritus agrees, and said that it is a clever move. After this Democritus leaves Delphi and travels back to Abdera.”

“Interesting,” Richard nodded, “but what would that all *mean*?”

“Good question, Richard. As a final word, Democritus expresses his relief that the forces of deception have now been confined. For the ultimate meaning of this all we are still groping in the dark and it is better you read the papyri yourself.”

“I don’t read old Greek, only Latin,” said Richard demurely.

“The Democritus papers have been translated in plain English. In fact, the translation is by John Armstrong!”

“*JOHN ARMSTRONG?!?*” Richard exclaimed. “How does *he* suddenly come into the picture?”

“That brings us to *where* we found the papyruses: in Madeira in the former mansion of Jonathan Tilloch, Andy’s uncle.”

Richard lower jaw fell down. “John was after the Rosicrucians... and after Andy?”

“Isn’t that clear, Richard? He was the one who knew about the Rosicrucian order of the Purple Rose and found the sanctuary on the Ponta da Cruz. We have the theory that John came to know about the Purple Rose on the evening he met his brother in Lockerbie, and that Mathew’s untimely death upset a plan they had been making, namely to go and look for the sanctuary on Madeira.”

“Ah... so *there* is the connection!” said Richard.

“Indeed, but then there is another puzzling fact: John resided long on Crete, within some other Rosicrucian sect, where he finished a piece of work he had kicked off already in Muirkirk, far before the Lockerbie catastrophe, a scientific and theosophical thesis with the title ‘*Theosophy and String Theory*’.”

“Hmm... a simple farmer writing a thesis about such subjects. Is that possible?”

“John was far from a simple farmer, Richard. I press you to read it. At least my son, who is a physics researcher at the University here, said that the maths and physics are fairly solid.”

“Well, I say! You both are giving me a lot of peculiar reading suddenly: writings by Democritus, a diary and a thesis by John Armstrong, and then this mystical book by the Count of St. Germain. It isn’t particularly my field, you know. I already start to feel dizzy.”

“Well, YOU hung up John Armstrong in that church basement... that was pretty nasty, and he must have felt very dizzy too!”

“Ok. Ok. I’ll try my best,” said Richard, raising both his hands as a feeble defence. “But... but... I really don’t see anything in all this old



mythology. I mean, these things about Mnemosyne, an androgenic titan creature, and this ring Abraxyne, this must all be merely myth. You are not going to convince me that they actually *existed*. Those early Greek philosophers were just groping in the dark at the time. They weren't doing any experimental work, tried to solve everything merely by logical thought. They were merely fantasizing."

"Well, as I've read from his scrolls, Democritus was totally absorbed in experimental work. He actually had equipped a whole laboratory. And, to be sure, it was Abraxyne that caused me to have three fingers less."

"You... you mean to say that this ring you found in Madeira is exactly the one Democritus described?"

"Yes, there can be no doubt about it."

"But surely, those must be purely mythological figures!"

"I can assure you, Richard, that Mnemosyne and Abraxyne exist in solid form to this day," said Michael.

"Mnemosyne too? ... Grown from a *tree*?" Richard stammered.

"Yes, the mummy of Mnemosyne was kept long in old temples in various places of the world, all the time being moved as the result of historical conquests and such. The only thing we know for certain is that at the time of the destruction of the Temple of Apollo by the Romans, the cist of Mnemosyne was moved to Crete."

"Ah..." Richard sighed.

"There she was kept by a Sethian order until, in 1712, she was again moved... to Glasgow."

"Oh, really? By whom?" asked Richard, with a faint expression of rekindling interest.

"By a certain James Tilloch."

Richard suddenly gaped for air again. "The ancestor of *ANDY*?"

"Yes, and later - in unruly times - this James Tilloch moved Mnemosyne from Glasgow to its final destination, on the advice of the Count of St. Germain."

“You must be kidding! You mean Funchal?”

“Yes, Richard. If you want to see Mnemosyne, I can show her to you. In that summer of 2005 I was probably the first person to open the sarcophagus after two and a half millennia. Mnemosyne appeared to be quite as Democritus described her.”

“On the Ponta da Cruz... That cliff?”

“Yes, *inside* the cliff.”

Richard slowly started to put the various pieces of information together. Then, in a stroke of anguish, he put both his hands on his head. “What am I getting myself in to?” he groaned, and then he tumbled backwards. In his confusion, he had forgotten that there was no backrest attached to the bench on his side of the pontoon, and with a small squeak dropped into the chilly stream.

#### 4

After this refreshing discussion on the pontoon, it was thus that Richard McGregor established himself at *The Prancing Pony* as a farmhand, and even became a distinguished addition to the household. Two months later, he was already preparing to move back to nearly independent Scotland. Financially, things had been a bit tight. Richard had no chance of buying a new home, because even a simple flat would have required more than ten times the amount he had gathered on his account, despite the fact that he had been able to sell his Washington estate at a fair price in the summer of 2006, a few years before the bank crisis in the US. After the alarming increase of the gold price in 2013, inflation accelerated in the US and then in Europe. This had the result that nearly all major banks that managed mortgages had become state-owned and had unattractive interest rates, so that Richard had moved his savings to a small, reliable, private bank in Glasgow, which at least had a good reputation and a little bit higher interest rates. Fortunately, he had now made some earnest money at the farm, and he had found a suitable rented apartment in the centre of

Glasgow. During his stay with the Willmores, he had taken it rather easy, and often he retired in the old guest room. So now and then he fancied helping Michael out behind the counter of the old, famous pub in the evening, when Michael was tired. The locals were quite agreeable country folk. He was surprised to find that in this rural area people were more and more assisting each other in all kinds of practical matters. This increase in solidarity was a logical result of the towering burdens of unemployment, which had risen to over twenty per cent in Britain, with an inflation rate at six per cent a week. Somehow, in Scotland the economy was less jeopardised compared to England proper, but the social climate was restless after Britain had separated itself from the EU, and after the 2014 referendum 65% of the Scots voted for full independence. This gave rise to quarrels with the government in London and particularly with Queen Elisabeth II, who didn't allow independence to be granted to Scotland. Now even the Welsh started to grumble and demand a referendum. Surprisingly, Northern Ireland remained silent.

It didn't overly disturb Richard: he was happy enough with his farm work and the prospect of a new life in Glasgow. Besides his own pile of novels, the surplus readings, comprising John's thesis and diary and various alchemical and mythological documents, given to him by Michael and Sheila, were not easily digested. John's diary had been rather unnerving. He observed all the dramatic events from a different angle, as if standing at the other side of the mirror, and he felt dejected for a while. Moreover, he had kept some dark secrets he rather wanted to forget.

Still, some of the alchemical treatises were quite to his liking, but others he considered unassailable for a modern, scientific mind. Nevertheless, some three hundred years ago the authors of these treatises were very famous, if not notorious. He slowly started to feel some coherence in all the scriptures of the Rosicrucian adepts and the Alchemists, when they wrote about the *prima materia*, the fiery water - moist fire - of the *Shamajim*

out of which everything was created, but to which all was also to be restored.

At the end, he was anxious to return to Scotland also for another reason: to find his precious Dorothea. He had high hopes of finding her somewhere in Glasgow. Before Richard would leave, however, he had agreed to have a final discussion with Sheila about his final commission. He had related to her his findings, and given his opinion. He would start out in Glasgow in the City Council, where he had found a temporary post. As it turned out, they badly needed people for re-arranging, indexing and digitising the City Archives, and he would, in the course of this work, be at the ideal spot to find out all about the Tilloch family.

On the last evening at the *Prancing Pony*, a Saturday evening in November, he had walked up to the swimming platform on the river bank again. The sun was nearly set, and Richard had been immersed in his own thoughts for a long time, watching the fiery orb sink behind the horizon. Finally, he saw his hostess approaching over the meadows. She had an energetic, childlike stride, and he continued to behold her appreciatively, until she arrived at the stream and took place on the opposite bench.

“Well, Richard, are you all set for big, unruly Scotland?” she asked.

“I think I’m quite ready for it, yes.”

“Glasgow is quite unsafe,” she warned.

“Always has been, Sheila, but the only place for me, I’m afraid.”

“You’ve not told us anything about your life in prison. Couldn’t you lift a bit of the veil of secrecy, before you leave?” Sheila asked.

“It was rather monotonous, really,” he answered.

“Aren’t we all living in our own little prisons, Richard?”

“How do you mean?”

“Aren’t we all prisoners of some sort? We close ourselves up in our little houses with these excessive mortgages, thinking we are free to do as we please?”

“Well... still a quantum leap from where I’ve been.”

“Sure, and the first years must have been quite difficult, I gather.”

“Yes, I certainly didn’t like the company in the beginning.”

“You mean your inmates? From what I hear they all must have been high-brows.”

“Some of them, yes, a haphazard bunch of well-educated, intelligent, but ultimately wholly corrupted people, and nearly all of them, as I did in the beginning, swearing on their innocence. Of course it was a good thing that some of the worst traders of the City were put in goal. That at least put an end to the murky speculation markets. No, no, the first thing for me was to get solitary confinement, because I just didn’t get along with those guys. They really think they are superior to everybody else, because they know how to get their hands on millions, even billions.”

“So, how did you manage in the beginning?”

“At first, I wrote a few research papers and patents, but then I ran out of fuel. They also took my PC away. Later an incident occurred that allowed me to get a slightly better cell, and a little bit more freedom within the premises.”

“Oh? What incident?”

“I was assaulted a few times by these youngsters... in the night,” said Richard in a soft voice looking down onto the pontoon.

“That’s not nice,” said Sheila clumsily.

“I had spouted some whimsical criticism to some of these rednecks, who were always discussing their sexual adventures in the mess.”

“Rednecks of that sort, quite different from the Covenanters, I suppose,” Sheila mumbled.

“Quite so, the next night they came in with a knife to castrate me, threatened to cut off my penis, saying that I evidently didn’t need it. I yelled and begged them not to do it, and they let me go with a warning. So, then I knew I’d better keep quiet in the mess.”

“Ah, I see... and then?”

“Around the time the economic recession started, and when Al-Megrahi was released, I got into a bad depression. For the first time in my life I needed professional help, but it appeared that the lady psychologist was very good. She helped me not only out of the pit, but also taught me how to get the most out of my remaining prison years. In the end, I had a few dependable comrades even, and found some new interests. Luckily, the juveniles were transferred from Onley at about the same time. Surely, the few supporting letters of your husband were also of much help.”

“So, in the end you got out quite well, don’t you think?”

“As you can see yourself, I’m a free man with employment, thanks to you all.”

“I wish you much luck, Richard, and anything you can clear up for me in the affair of my father and Andy is appreciated. Were there any hints you got out of the literature we supplied?”

“Not really anything definitive, but I will study on it further. Particularly John’s thesis is intriguing; a strange commixture of scientific and mythological ingredients. There’s something fishy about it though.”

“What do you mean?”

“It reads strangely, somehow. As if each page was written slightly differently. I’d rather take it with me for further study.”

“That’s OK. No literature for me anyway.”

“May I ask you about Philip Chance? Did I hear it correctly that he was a good friend of yours?”

“Oh, Phil,” Sheila said and her eyes were dropping. “Yes, he was a very good friend indeed. He even shared our little secret. Of course, he was a bit disconcerted by it all.”

“What actually happened in the cathedral? They were awfully secretive about it in the news.”

“We don’t really know ourselves either. He had been aggravating some people in the parish with readings from the *Pistis Sophia*, the *Koran* and the

*Book of Certitude*. He had also been active for many years to get ordination rights for women all the way up to the rank of Archbishop.”

“And they still have no clue as to who did it?”

“This person, who blew himself up during the service, could not be identified. They say he was foreign, but I don’t quite believe that.”

“Well, it was a shock for the whole nation.”

“It was a nightmare. Phil had been studying much on the material you have seen; he even visited Maria’s cellar in Funchal. Initially he felt uneasy with all the findings. When he came back, he speculated that we found the Holy Sepulchre, which the Templars had protected in Jerusalem, and then had brought to England. He was still much contemplating the matter, especially Delphi. Anyway, when Phil was visiting us, a few weeks before the bombing, he was a bit down, sitting in a corner, staring gloomily at his pint of bitter. Michael couldn’t draw anything out of him, apart from an utterance that *it was such a shame that Apollo has so long been robbed of his laurel leaves*.”

“You mean, he referred to the last oracle given at Delphi?”

“Yes.”

“So, am I to understand that, as an Anglican Dean, he was actually concerned about the Oracle of Delphi still being closed?” Richard asked.

“He must have been, yes, in some way.”

“So he actually *believed* in this Pagan institution?”

“I don’t know, but at least he came to realise something specific just before he died,” said Sheila.

“Delphi,” Richard muttered. “I think there are many strange references to Delphi in John’s thesis, but somehow he doesn’t really *discuss* the famous oracle.”

“It is about modern science and theosophy mostly,” said Sheila. “Not something we know much about. Didn’t you discuss with my father about theosophical matters? Was it not so that he bothered you with it?”

“Well, Sheila, unfortunately I’ll have to make a few confessions more, and hope you will forgive me that I have kept it all to myself so far.”

“Well, that’s OK. Please, enlighten me,” said Sheila.

“As I said earlier, that he was intruding in my life, I have to correct this. In fact, things were just the opposite. If I recall correctly, it was on a winter evening, when I was reading in all peace and quiet for my exams, that your father knocked at my door for the first time. ‘*Can I have a word?*’ he asked, putting his foot in the door opening. After asking who he was and on what business he was calling, he said: ‘*I’m John Armstrong, and I’ve caught somebody ransacking my house. His name is Andy Tielock. Is it true he is your friend?*’ I confirmed that he was an old study-friend of mine. Then John explained that he had caught Andy stealing an old manuscript, one he had just purchased a week earlier at the local antiquarian, and which he had given to his wife as a birthday present. I must have said something like: ‘*Oh, how shameful!*’ but then John said angrily: ‘*Don’t you try to deceive me, my lad! Your friend claims you set him up to it.*’ I implored him not to call the police, and that he’d better come in, so that I could explain the matter. It turned out, after some talk, that he was not at all angry. He was just interested in this strange book. I explained that it was a rare treasure and it had been a terrible mistake that Andy had brought it to the antiquarian book shop. John told me that he had not deemed it of any particular value, and had seen it fit for his wife. It was neatly written in French, with nice illustrations, and he hadn’t given it much of a sight or a thought. However, his interest was roused after Andy had tried to steal it. After some initial discussion with Andy, he couldn’t learn much from him, because Andy wasn’t any expert in these matters. Thus, he started to study the book for himself. In the end, the contents of the book even filled an important gap in his knowledge. On one of his later visits, he mumbled: ‘*Now it is all clear: these symbols are instruments, not only used in rituals but also as teaching tools!*’ Now, at the time, I was very interested in pagan rituals, and I asked what he meant. Thus, he informed me about the symbolism of the objects



displayed in the book: the *Crux Ansata*, the *Serpent*, the *triangular Altar*, the *Ibis*, the *Axe*, the *Cup* and the *Sword*.”

“Many of these objects are found in Maria’s cellar,” said Sheila.

“Exactly, and they are Hermetic symbols, but according to John they were also tools of instruction. Now I have taken notice that there is at least one object in your cellar that is not mentioned in the book: this huge *golden cross*.”

“What about it?” asked Sheila.

“It has been stolen,” said Richard, “and I know where it is from.”

“Oh?” Sheila stammered.

“It is pretty large and precious, wouldn’t you say?” said Richard.

“I calculated with Maria, that its present value must be something like half a billion pounds when only counting the gold,” Sheila said.

“It also has a rosette of red rubies in the centre, hasn’t it?” asked Richard.

“Yes, that’s correct. Like a rose.”

“Well, I can inform you with certainty that the cross you have wisely kept safely guarded in Funchal was once stolen from an ancient shrine in Damascus. This place should still be there: the ancient Abbey of the Rose Cross, where once the so-called *Cross of Sharon* was kept, also called the *Rose of Sharon*.”

“The golden cross is called the *Rose of Sharon*?” asked Maria.

“Yes, Sheila, it was made by a Christian Jew with that name, and this cross was stolen in 1720, together with a few other treasures, from Abbey of the Rose Cross,” Richard added.

“You mean, by the Tillochs?” asked Sheila.

“Very likely!” said Richard. “It seems the Tillochs gathered many objects from around the world, and they were also in Damascus.”

“Is there any proof of that?” asked Sheila.

“Sure! Your father visited Damascus once, didn’t he?”

“With mother, yes,” Sheila nodded.

“Unfortunately I have to continue my confessions,” said Richard with a lower voice. “During one of his visits at my home, John mentioned that he had travelled to Damascus, to the ancient shrine of the Rose Cross. He told me that they once had in their possession, in their museum, many artefacts that had been salvaged from an ancient temple in Syria, dedicated to the Goddess Cybele, harbouring many objects that were used in sacred rites. This roused my interest and I pushed John to reveal what he had found out. I was particularly interested in the use of the *sistrum*, and I put more pressure on him to reveal what he knew. However, he was very obstinate. ‘*You will misuse your knowledge, and it will bring about misfortune,*’ he said. Thus, in the end, I decided to *squeeze* it out of him, with the help of my friends.”

“You mean that you tortured him for *information*?” Sheila yelled, getting all red in the face.

“That is the unfortunate truth, Sheila,” said Richard. “I’m really terribly sorry.”

Sheila gave a deep sigh, and seeing Richard’s evasive gaze, she said: “Please continue, Richard, out with the truth!”

“Well, John didn’t tell us anything more specific, and you know what happened,” Richard mumbled. “He escaped, and then we were in a delicate situation. I didn’t fancy waiting for the police to knock at our door. So, I decided to fly to Damascus, with George, and try to find all we could for ourselves. We visited the ancient abbey, and we presented ourselves as archaeologists, and asked after the whereabouts of the ruins of the ancient temple of Cybele. We dug at various places in the time of a month. Then finally we found the *sistrum* together with these two axes, which we smuggled back to Britain.”

“So, this *sistrum* we found in Andy’s possession was originally from that *same* place in Syria?”

“Yes,” Richard continued, “we studied the objects at length, and Andy first had the *sistrum* under study. We agreed that we would circulate our

bounty among the four of us. With Andy I agreed that I would get the sistrum back from him, and in turn I would give him one of the axes for study. So, on that ill-fated evening I arrived at his home, but it appeared that he was away. At a few occasions he had said that this was all getting a bit out of hand, and I thought he might have turned to John's camp. It was thus in my frustration that I chopped down that bus stop, and Mathew Armstrong after that, as you already know."

"You have been telling us all the time half-truths, Richard," said Sheila.  
*"Shame on you!"*

"I'm really very sorry," Richard mumbled, nodding his head submissively.

"Well, is there anything else you haven't told us about Mathew Armstrong?"

"I didn't know anything of John having a twin brother, but after all you have told me, it appears to me very likely, that Mathew, John and Andy on that evening in Lockerbie pieced together the fact that James Tilloch was behind the robberies in Maleme and in Damascus."

"Travelling as Archaeologists and robbing things... As you ended up doing also!" said Sheila.

"Yes, indeed, but Tilloch did it for a good reason."

"Which is?" asked Sheila.

"Allegedly for the reconstruction of the Garden of Eden, as it reads in John's diary, but I believe it was for some other purpose. I will have to study on this more. I should also visit Maria's place."

"I suppose we must return at least this precious cross to Damascus," said Sheila.

"Yes, when things have calmed down a bit in Syria," said Richard.

"Before you go to Funchal, Richard, I think you'd better establish yourself in Glasgow first. Maria and her husband are coming over for a visit in December anyway. They are attending our little concert before Christmas."

“Ah. You mean the reunion concert of the Music Academy in Glasgow for which you have been preparing so fiercely; a piece by Max Bruch, was it not?”

“Yes, and a few others. Will you come and listen?”

“Just before Christmas? Oh, yeah... Sure... I’ll be there! Maybe we could then afterwards discuss about the mystery of Mnemosyne... over a grand dinner perhaps?”

“That’s fine for me, but please try to earn some money before you all spend it on us. The restaurants are awfully expensive nowadays, and before long food will become scarce with all these international trade irregularities and strikes.”

“I think I’ll manage. Much thanks for all your kind help.”

Sheila nodded, “You’re welcome. And do not forget our small commission to find out about Andy’s family.”

“I have taken note of it, yes; not an uninteresting assignment!” said Richard.

Then they strolled slowly across the musty meadow, the air being filled with a tranquil, moist farewell.

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# PART I

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*Dealbatę Latonam & rumpitę libros.*

## 2. From the Scrolls of Democritus

*œ Interludium primum œ*

### I



- Democritus of Abdera - take up my reed and bundle of blank papyruses, to report on my sojourns through Egypt, Persia and India. It all started in the third year of the Peace with the Persians, as the unexpected result of a discourse with my caring companion, Kundris, to whom I recollected my early days of tuition with Lucas of Jerusalem and my recent studies with Leucippus. Although my revered Jewish teacher had elaborated many times about the fourfold make-up of Nature, and the way God had shaped everything from the four elements into three spheres of existence, his lectures had always left a serious gap in my understanding. In my world, the atoms were still moving around without purpose in a cold void. I had always been inquisitive and asked questions most ardently, so much so that in our disputes, Archelaos, who was one of the older pupils of Anaxagoras and had also joined the class, had scorned me, saying that I'd better keep quiet in the presence of higher masters. Lucas, however, had defended me and stated: "Truly, Democritus will one day surpass all those of his age in scholarship."

Still, I felt differently, and I complained to Kundris: "Then, I was only a minor among those of his class, seen only sixteen summers. Now, the days are getting ripe for further instruction. Even the theories of Leucippus about the causes of movement and about the hidden forces, which had led us to propose the existence of the atoms, left in the end many questions unanswered. For instance: are light and thought also to be considered as manifestations of atoms. Can this be?"

“I think that your theory is falling short of reason,” said Kundris, “and it is not in concordance with the views that the world is one great unity, ever evolving and renewing, far from a cold void filled with sand grains.”

“Maybe I should go to Parmenides, to hear his views on this point,” I proposed. “He was always much arguing with Heraclitus about this.”

“Then you didn’t hear the sad news?” Kundris said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Parmenides has died, already two years ago.”

“Oh, how sad indeed,” I responded clumsily. “Have I really been so much absorbed in my worldly affairs that I didn’t notice his passing away?”

Kundris explained that I evidently had done so, but then she made a surprising proposition: “High time you should head for Egypt, and seek advice from Hermes, the third Lord of Hermopolis, who teaches the ancient lore of Isis and Osiris, and the Visions of Poimandros! Solon, Thales and Pythagoras have all studied with him. Your father’s friend, Hecateus, has spoken repeatedly of him, and said that Hermes III is the last descendant of the holy Egyptian priesthood, who holds the ancient keys of divine wisdom of Tehut. These teachings reflect much of our Chaldean ideas too.”

“So you have always stressed your own philosophy and tried to make it my own, but would you allow me to go and follow courses all the way in Egypt?” I asked.

“Of course! My brother Argus can come and help me and Hecateus can arrange some lodgings at Hermopolis for you. He has many friends there.”

“I suppose you can manage well with your brother in my absence,” I mumbled, “but how will I manage to get all the way to Hermopolis?”

“Are you not allowed the use of your father’s trireme?” Kundris asked.

“I hardly ever dared to ask such a thing, and you know why,” I replied.

“It has not been in use for a long time after the peace with the Persians. Surely, Athenocritus wouldn’t mind to lend it, and his men will obey him

at the clap of his hand. They will be able to take you to Egypt in the shortest possible time. Maybe your father would fancy travelling to Egypt himself too.”

Not unhappy with Kundris’ interesting new idea, I thus stepped into my father’s mansion, and asked how he would feel if I were to lend his trireme for a while. As it was his precious inheritance from Megacles, obtained from the last battle at Salamis, he at first slightly marvelled at my request. I asked whether he had any desire to travel to Egypt. He said he had many times thought about it, but he had just at that moment too many matters to attend to in the Thracian senate. Still, he was not against the idea of me going all the way to Hermopolis. “You might even bump into my old friend Menander there. He wrote me a week ago that he was taking courses with Hermes the Third. So, when you are in Egypt, and take my men all the way with my trireme, you may go and see a few more places along the Nile, such as Thebes, Memphis and Karnak.”

In this way, I was able to leave already within a week. Many men from Abdera were indebted to my father, and for a neat compensation a sufficient number could be found to man the trireme. The journey took only four days, stopping for a while at Knossos. Finally, when passing on the Nile I had time to visit all the places my father had mentioned, before settling in Hermopolis. In Memphis I duly paid my respects to the Asclepeion, and after this the famous trireme of Megacles, that had sailed frequently in blood-stained waters, returned home.

My lodgings at Hermopolis were decent and tidy, but small and in a crowded street near the main market place. On the following day I visited Lord Hermes to ask final admission to his course. When he received me, I found him dressed in an impeccable white garment, and despite his high age he was very comely to behold with his two-pointed white beard and penetrating blue eyes. He had somehow been informed of my arrival beforehand, and asked: “So you are Democritus of Abdera, the famous pupil of Leucippus?” This I confirmed and he looked at me attentively.



Then he mentioned that the course consisted of two parts: the General Sermon, which is given to everyone at his home, and the secret teachings, which are given only to the worthy in the Temple of Tehut on the nearby mountain. It seemed he was more than pleased to have me as his pupil. Thus, I write here the Axioms of Tehut as they were conveyed to me by Hermes the Third Great, in the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the 83<sup>rd</sup> Olympiad.

## II

On the first day, we entered the house of the Master just before sunrise. All the apprentices, some thirty in number of varying age, were seated on the floor of a lofty room. We were awaiting the entry of our great teacher in obedient silence. We knew he was absorbed in morning-prayer to Amun-Ra on the terrace on the roof of his house, and after a long hour of silent waiting, we heard him softly stepping down. He recited in a slow, penetrating voice:

*The lips of Wisdom are sealed  
except to the ears of understanding,  
Where one hears the steps of the Master,  
the ears of the pupil are unlocked,  
and their hearts will be filled with His Wisdom.  
The student comes to the Master,  
the Master not to the student.  
He who comes as a Sophist,  
will teach false things.*

He then informed us that the first lesson would be, logically, about the Universe, but that he would start the next day, only after we had deeply contemplated his first words. So it was that during the two hours of silence a few pupils decided to withdraw from the scene, leaving the more motivated ones behind to receive his tuition.

The subject for the first day was the *Mental Universe*. The Master spoke slowly, but in a clear and impregnating voice:

*All is Mind,  
the Universe is Mental.*

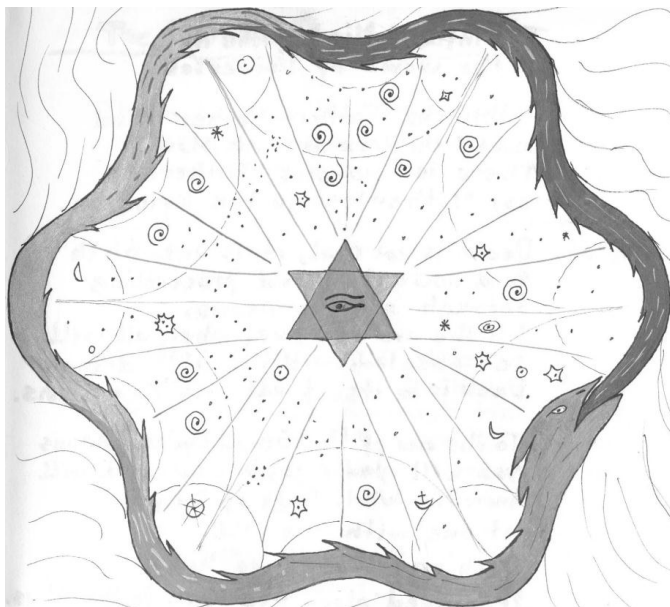
Then he seated himself on a high chair, which was almost like a throne, the armrests being supported by a lion on the right side and a panther on the left side. He started his explanations in a slightly quicker voice: “He who understands this first principle, that all is Mental, and that the Universe is a creation of a Great Mind, the Pure Spirit, whom we call the One God, has stepped onto the road to wisdom. He who knows God will be shielded from evil, yea, he will not even be subject to Destiny. Religion is the knowledge of God.”

Then he stepped down from his seat, and slowly gesticulating, raising his hands up and down, he recited:

*Under and beyond the Universe  
of Time, Space and Change  
is ever to be found the Substantial Reality,  
the Fundamental Truth.  
This Reality is beyond naming,  
but the Wise call it The All.  
While everything is in the All,  
it is equally true that the All is in everything.*

Taking his seat, he explained his words further as follows: “There is a mystery, the mystery of *That Which Transcends all Being*. This is the substantial reality. All earthly being is false, untrue, a mere imprint of the Higher Law. Between the higher reality and the lower reside the sensible gods to whom we may relate through faith and determination. In essence, the All, which is called the *Ain-Soph* by our Jewish brothers, is unknowable, infinite Space and Time.”

Then he summoned that we should ponder deeply on the *Unknowable* and its relation to *Reason*. He sat motionless for an hour, and during the long silence some of the pupils became restless, and looked around wondering what would happen next. It did not in the least disturb our great teacher, and I also knew from my former teacher Lucas that all great Masters keep a long silence, when they wanted their words to be pondered by their pupils seriously. After the great silence he said: "Let us have our victuals now, before we will contemplate the *Great Paradox*." His words were strangely relaxing and disturbing at the same time, and I was confident that I was not only to learn new things, but also to learn known things in a new way. We were all shown into a spacious dining room, where a sumptuous dinner was awaiting us. When everyone was seated, our teacher said: "As we sit around the table and eat, we can think about the Mental Universe, as depicted above." We all looked up and beheld the following figure, which was painted on the ceiling:



I thought about his earlier words and this drawing with some confusion, and had to conclude that he had actually said *nothing* about the universe, apart from it having some aspects that cannot be known, and this was a bit frustrating. We had a richly laid out table before us, as in the next days to come, and all had soon found nourishment. When we had returned to the class room, Hermes stated: “Although in essence the All is unknowable, all statements of Reason must be warmly embraced, and treated with due respect. He who understands the nature of the All, has proceeded much on the path to Wisdom.” Then he recited the next mantra, in his slow and penetrating voice, standing before his throne, waving his arms up and down again:

*The All is held in the Mind of the All,  
creating countless Æons, Universes, Time,  
Yet, to the All and the Great Mind of the All,  
the creation, development and death  
of a Million Universes  
is as the twinkling of an eye.*

Part of this I had heard before from Anaxagoras, who had had been in dispute with Parmenides about this matter, but now, as I heard it from the mouth of my new teacher, I understood it in a new light. The thought entered that I still had many scores to settle with Anaxagoras about the *nous* and the *vortex* stirring the Great Chaos. Hermes continued:

*The Infinite Mind of the All  
is the Womb of Universes.  
Within the Father-Mother Mind  
mortal children are at Home.  
There is no-one without father or  
Mother in the Universe.*

To this Hermes added: “You must all understand that Death is not real: it is but birth to a new Life, and a continuous journey through all the Æons, till the End of Time, when all will be consoled, and the All draws back into itself all His Creations. To the end of the grand cycle of Æons you will go with joy, because you will know the whole truth of Being, and will be at one with the All, and at peace with it. Such say those who have proceeded along the Path to the Abyss and have returned from it. Realise this, that *Life* is both the centre and the circumference of the totality of *Good*. It is the sceptre in the hand of Amun, and the richest gift of Osiris. Thus, Ptah-Hotep says, in his *Book of Breathings*:

*Be not ungrateful to thy Creator,  
for he has given thee life.  
I am the Fount of Light,  
I pierce the Darkness.  
I make clear the Path for all;  
the Lord of Joy.”*

With these highly encouraging words Hermes entered on the subject of The Divine Paradox. Standing again before us he said:

*All that is finite in the Universe  
must be treated as real,  
yet with the Mind of the All,  
these phenomena are seen as in a dream.  
This is the Divine Paradox of the  
Absolute and the Relative:  
The things as God knows them  
are not the things as Man understands them,  
even in his highest Reason.*

He slowly stepped back and sat down on his explanation seat. “To understand the All, is difficult, and to speak of it virtually impossible; the same for God who is inside the All. How can we, earthly bodies, express the Bodiless? How can we, imperfect beings, express the perfect? How can we in our evanescent existence connect to the Eternal? The key to understanding this paradox, therefore, is that all things that are figureless and unmanifest, cannot be comprehended by our senses and reason. Yea, all that which cannot be spoken of is God. Thus, I warn you all: Do not believe those who defy the Laws of Nature, and also not those who believe only in material things: They will both lead you from the path. There are no miracles other than Life itself, which remains the ultimate miracle and mystery. There are not merely material things, since they are held up in their existence by the Mind of the All.” Then in his steady, reciting voice he continued, stepping down from his chair:

*Mind, as well as Matter,  
may be transmuted,  
from state to state;  
degree to degree;  
condition to condition;  
pole to pole;  
vibration to vibration.*

Hermes explained this further as follows: “The truly Wise, knowing the nature of the Universe, use the Higher Law against the lower laws, as the lower laws are only derivative of the Higher Law. One can say that the lower laws are the Higher Law made manifest, but in fragmented form. Truly, transmutation is a Mental Art by which the Wise learn to convert that which is worthless into that which is precious, and in this way they gain victory over their own Self. Mastery is not attained by vain denial, but by using the higher law against the lower, and escaping the pains of the

lower planes by vibrating on the higher plane. Transmutation is the *weapon* of the Master.”

At this point he sat down on his lofty seat again and said: “To sum up the first day of our course, I, as the living descendant of the ancient Egyptian Priesthood, thus firmly deny that everything is merely matter, or as the Greeks say, *physica*. On the contrary, the priesthood distinguish both the Soul Life and the Mind of Nature, which express themselves not only on the scale of the cosmos but also inside man. There is thus Mind of Reason, which the Greeks neatly call Logos, which is a being peculiar to itself, creating the world of becoming as an on-going process of generation. As the forefather of all beings in generation we place the Creator, and thus we are acquainted with the Life-giving Power which is prior to the celestial spaces and permeates them. Above the universe we place the Mind of the All, the Pure Mind, for which the universe as a whole is one and undivided, However - and mark my words! - it is variously manifested in several spheres, or levels of being. By the theurgy known to our priests we thus reach out to higher and more universal states of being, above the Seven Spheres of Destiny, ascending to God the Creator, and we do so without using any material means, other than the observation of a suitable opportunity. For you this opportunity for rising higher towards the heavenly Spheres lies in this preliminary course. Use it well! I will see you all again tomorrow.”

This concluded the first day of instruction, and all the pupils, except for Tat, his son, left the house towards their night quarters. However, as it appeared, Hermes was particularly interested in me, and took me apart. “As you are Democritus, the pupil of Leucippus, I suppose you are the one who has studied on Matter more than any other man, and I would like to hear you explain to me the theory of the *Atoms*.” This I found rather surprising, and I asked why. He said: “It interests me to know more about it, because the hypothesis is quite new, and it is worth considering.”

Thus, I explained to him the evidence of hidden forces in some of my experiments, such as those that brought me and Leucippus to arrive at a theory of atoms. For instance, I explained the wheat flour experiment: when a small amount of fine wheat flour is spread thinly on the water surface, you can see that the wheat grains move chaotically around in a way that cannot be explained other than that they must be pushed around by vigorously moving smaller bodies. "They are so small that we cannot see them, but that does not mean they do not exist, and they have a very vigorous nature," I said.

"Indeed! So it seems to be," Hermes smiled. We sat down for a while talking more. His young and pretty wife - she could not have been older than twenty five, while Hermes was known to be already over seventy - brought in two cups of Chinese tea. It was in this tranquil moment that I enquired how he thought about Nature and its elements, and how the atoms could have come into being. He answered: "Everything was made from the Will of The One. From Him Nature received the Logos, and seeing it was good, it made copies of itself, shaping itself into a fixed cosmos, by means of its own elements and through the birth of Souls. As the Mind of the All is the Mind of God, having both Light and Life in One, being both Male and Female, it brought forth another mind to give all things final shape. This deputy mind then appointed, in its turn, seven Archons, the Rulers of Fate."

"Who was the deputy mind?" I asked.

"It was the formative mind, who is at one with Nature and God. For he is co-existing with nature, although an essential element of itself, and in our world it is the Mind of Nature. This Mind we can observe by meditation and interpretation of dreams and coincidence."

"So, there is something like a Mind of Nature, a *shared* mind?"

"Yes, it is a certain fabric of the cosmos, which we could call the great Unfolding of the All. It is something only the Chinese have been able to comprehend more clearly. As I learned more than forty years ago from my



good friend and teacher Kun-Fu-Tse, he gave great value to observing facts of coincidence. As causal laws learn us the connection between things unfolding in time, there is also a fabric that holds together all things that occur at the same time, but unfold even at great distances from each other. Still, we would like to speak of the Logos that empowers both.”

I sipped slowly my tea, and was filled with great warmth, not only due to the excellent tea, but moreover by the words of my master, which suddenly came as rays of sunlight upon me. “Thus, Nature sprang out of the Logos?” I asked.

“Yes, Nature rejoices with Nature, Nature conquers Nature and Nature restrains Nature by means of the Divine Word, the Logos. But it is also so that the Logos takes inspiration from Nature’s unfolding, such that it becomes the Mind of Formation, a continual process of creation.”

“So you say that everything is essentially Mind, acting on Nature, but also drawing *from* Nature?” I asked.

“You heard so correctly. See it as some form of *Divine Fascination*, or a *Divine Enthusiasm*. Now you have come close to understanding of the First Principle.”

“What then does the Formative Mind do, and how does it work?” I asked again.

“Now I should warn you that we are already proceeding into the Secret Teachings, of which I cannot tell you all at this stage. See it as like to a snake, at one with Reason, surrounding the Spheres of Being, and setting them to spin.”

This reminded me of Anaxagoras’ vortex, and also the picture above the dining table. “You mean to say that life spun out of the great vortex of ideas?” I asked.

“Maybe better to say it otherwise: The Mind and Logos, after residing long in the invisible and unmanifest, came forth into genesis by means of motion, as given by the shaking of Tyeth. This I will all describe in more

detail tomorrow in my discourse on the first causes of life: the mingling of the Three Principalities.”

Thus, the first day ended in this surprisingly happy meeting. Although I did not quite understand all my Master had told, he evidently was happy to have me around, because I seemed to ask the right questions, and he even took pleasure when I asked the same question over and over again, although in different guises.

### III

The second day started in quite the same fashion as the first. We arrived before sunrise, and duly waited for our Master to return from his prayers on the roof. The main subject of the day was the Axiom of Correspondence.

*As above, so below;  
as below, so above.*

Again he gesticulated with his hands in a particular way, first up and then in a slow movement down, as if he would bring the heavenly spheres tangibly down upon us all, in the same way as he had descended from the terrace of his roof. After his short words, he unexpectedly disappeared in an adjoining room, from where he re-appeared rolling before him into the class room a heavy, round tablet of green granite, on which Egyptian, Greek and Arabic texts were written.

“The Axiom of Correspondence is the most central idea of our teachings. It is even so important that I have ordered many years ago this tablet to be made as an aid for my pupils. Engraved by Cassius the Roman, who once was the sculptor and scribe of Pharaoh Psamtich III, it gives the central idea of my teachings in the three main languages of the present day. Then he took stand before the stone, and recited:

*True, without error, certain and most true:  
As things are below, so they are above,  
and as things are above, so they are below,  
performing the miracles of the One.*



*And as all things were from the One,  
by means of the meditation of the One,  
thus all things were born from the One,  
by means of adaptation.*

*Its father is the Sun, its mother is the Moon,  
the Wind carried it in its belly, its nurse is the earth.  
The father of the whole world it is.*



*Its power is perfected if it has been turned into earth.  
Separate the earth from the fire,  
the subtle from the dense, caringly, yet with great effort.  
It ascends from earth into heaven and again it descends to the earth,  
and receives the power of higher and of lower things.*



*Thus you will gain the Glory of the whole world,  
and all obscurity will flee from you.  
Of all strength this is the True Strength,  
because it will conquer all that is subtle,  
and penetrate all that is solid.  
Thus was the world created.  
From this were wonderful adaptations made,  
of which this is the means.*



*Therefore am I named Hermes the Thrice-Greatest,  
supporting the three parts of the philosophy of the World.  
It is definitive, what I have said about the workings of the Sun.*

Slowly he turned and sat back on a high chair and started a lengthy clarification of his emerald tablet. "This text is a mere beginning. There are many more written in the ancient Egyptian temples, which I am still translating in the new Egyptian tongue. Hopefully, they will be available someday also in the other languages. Unfortunately, the translation is very time consuming, not because of their length, but due to the difficulty of finding the proper words. Thus, I would like to further explain to you this text, since it is fundamental to many beliefs, Chinese, Indian, Persian, Egyptian, Chaldean, Jewish. Truly, there are Three Principles of the universal realms, although they have definite boundaries, they possess boundless potentialities of idea and form, and I call them the *Principalities*. They are in essence *Light* and *Darkness* and in their midst resides the *Pure Spirit*, which is the One of whom I spoke, penetrating all, like incense, a forcible fragrance that travels with inconceivable motion through all the *Æons*, breaking all boundaries of space and time. Although the three *Principalities* can also be merely called Energy, Matter and Intelligence, which make up the universe, I would like to speak of them rather as the Light, the Darkness and the Spirit. Outside this universe, if there is lack of one of the *Principalities*, the universe is dormant, virtually non-existent. In the Intelligent universe, the Light is always above and the Darkness below and Spirit in some way, as I have said earlier, between them: the Light impinges from above into the Darkness beneath, like rays of the sun, while the fragrance of the Spirit is carried in every direction. Therefore, the combined Power of the Spirit and Light descends into the Darkness beneath. Now, the Darkness is like an awesome sea of Water, like a great *Abyss*, into which the Light together with the Spirit is drawn down, but the Darkness, is not without understanding. In fact, it is quite intelligent of its own accord, and it knows that if the Light and Spirit were taken away from it, it would remain isolated, concealed, without power and effect; it would miss the splendour of the Light and Spirit. Thus the Darkness will do all it can to keep them bound to itself. As the Darkness strives to enslave the

Light and Spirit, also the Light and the Spirit themselves contend for their own power: they strive to raise up from the dark abysmal water below in which they have become mingled, but each of the Principalities realises that they cannot be entirely without the other two, since they also want to become manifest, and not just slumber in dream. Now, these Principalities, in their infinite number and boundlessness, are sensible each according to their own essence, and they are at perfect peace, as long as they remain by themselves. If, however, one power mingles with another power, as is necessary, their contrasting tendencies bring about a certain reactive motion as a result of their separate impulse. There is something like a collision. This resembles much what Democritus here has proposed of the concurrent motion of hot and cold groups of atoms, but it can more aptly be seen as an in- and out-breathing of space and power, which is the breathing cycle of the Æons. However, since the powers of the three Principles are infinite in number, there will arise an infinity of concurrences, infinite images and forms are produced of the different kinds of living creatures due to the imprinting of intelligence on the Light and into the Dark abyss. Now, listen carefully: The first main concurrence of the Principalities gave rise to the primeval image of Heaven and Earth, which is also the image of the Womb. Then in the midst of Heaven and Earth further gatherings of power came together, and further images were imprinted of different kinds of living creatures, still more infinite, and to all these different kinds of living creatures the splendour of the Light and the fragrance of the Spirit were assigned. Accordingly, out of the abysmal Water a first-born appeared who was cause of all production of Nature and Man. As our text says: *the Wind carried it in its belly*, meaning it was as by a certain pregnant impulse, a Wind passionate and unruly, being of Osiris as we Egyptians say, and raising, as in the form of a winged serpent, the abysmal Water to foam, rendering Nature pregnant. Then our text says: *its Nurse is the Earth*, it is Mother Earth, our goddess Isis, who receives the power of reproduction. Isis veils the Light from above that has been sown

into her together with the fragrance of the Spirit of Osiris, her mind shaping a multitude of images; thus Osiris is the perfect god, brought down from the higher Light and Spirit into a human form and nature, as Isis, but Osiris is struggling to be freed from his earthly forms, unable to find liberation and the way out of himself. For he was merely a ray from above, abstracted from that Perfect Light, that became submerged in the twisting and overpowering, bitter, blood-stained Water. Therefore, when the Light and the Spirit have sunk into the impure and disorderly Womb of manifold suffering of Isis, Osiris, as a winged Serpent, will be turned into a Beast, into a servant. Thus, in order to strip off his servant form and regain his celestial garment, his sufferings should be overcome and he should drink the Cup of Living Water. Of course this all relates to the mystery of Isis and Osiris, which we will treat in the secret teachings.”

After this long speech Hermes glanced in my direction, with a cunning smile, and asked: “Are there any questions?”

“How is it that all things were made by *adaptation*?” I asked.

“Surely, everybody who studies Nature will know this. Salomon, the great sage of his time, was always studying the living creatures, and he used to say: ‘*Study the ants, and become wise.*’ Really, ants are not so very different from us. They are very industrious, they build their own cities, taking care of their Queen - since they live still in the maternal regime - and they do things collectively, ruled by one spirit, represented by their Queen. Remember that the image of the *city* is also a primeval idea of the principalities. Now, the adaptation is a reaction to necessities, as there are limitations to this life on the material plane. If the ant’s nest is burned by a forest fire it may be that some ants that escaped the fire are better equipped to withstand fire, and thus their offspring will inherit this trait. Thus, the adaptation is a reaction to Fate, as ruled by the Archons. However, the spirit records this adaptation and uses it also elsewhere in nature, since it is pervading everything. The spirit learns from Fate, and

creates and adapts its creatures from it. Yea, the Mind of the All learns from the Creatures he has himself created.”

It was then that an elder man among the pupils - whom I had recognised instantly as Menander of Corinth, the old friend of my father, and one of the new initiates of Delphi - opened up and asked: “Is it possible to apply this knowledge in some *practical* way?”

Hermes answered: “The acquisition of knowledge, unless accompanied by a determination to turn it into action, is like the gathering of precious metals and gems and closing them up in a cave, which is a vain and foolish pursuit. Knowledge, like wealth, is intended for *use*. There is such a thing as the universal Law of Utility. If you violate it, you will suffer because of the growing conflict with the natural forces.”

Another pupil asked: “How are we then to apply rules from the Higher Spheres, as the Lower spheres have lack of understanding?”

Hermes was very happy with this question: “One of my main axioms, which we will discuss later, and which we will learn to apply, is that the Wise - the King or Queen - serves on the higher, but rules on the lower. They obey the laws coming from above them, but do so at their own plane of comprehension. They rule those below them and give due orders, and yet, in so doing, they form a part of the higher law, instead of opposing it. The ruler falls in with the Law, and by understanding its movements he utilises it instead of being its blind slave. And yet, wise man and fool are both subject to the Higher Law. He who understands this is well on the road to Masterhood.”

“But if we return to the limitations of life and the hard fate, that is forced onto people at times, like the forest fires, the floods and the earthquakes, how is Man able to adapt himself to this?” Menander continued.

“This is a most dear question,” said Hermes, “First and for all, the truthful spiritual man, who knows himself, should not resort to magic, even if he thinks it fitting, nor should he force necessity, but rather suffer

her course, according to her nature and decree. Rather he should progress by seeking only, through the knowledge of himself and God, to gain the Trinity that none can name, and let Fate do whatever she will to her own body. Secondly, and this as a reassurance, God, the Light Spirit, has bestowed two gifts on Man in order to provide him with the necessities of life, and a way to adapt to Fate: From the beginning he made Nature itself so that it supports Man even in his most deprived state, because Man is part of Nature, and Nature's capacity for adaptation is yet so much larger. But still, when reduced to its last extremity, as such in the case of large calamities, the human race may still grow and increase by virtue of solidarity and inventiveness, the reason of Heart and Head, which the creator has implanted in the human race. Thus, Man has been brought forth as a fair gift to Nature, as having a greater aptitude toward survival, and having his own ability for creation."

There was suddenly much discussion about the forces of destruction, and from where they originated. I asked: "Certainly, there are also many disasters that are caused by Man *himself*, for instance all the great wars. How are we to believe that Man adapts to this?"

"As you will have experienced," he said, "there are dark forces within the Mind of Man. Forces that are incompatible with the Mind of Nature. These forces, coming forth from lack of moderation and contempt for all things created by the One God, are not easily expelled, since they are part of the lower layers of the abysmal Water, as some sort of jealousy. Luckily, we now live in an era of peace after the Persian wars, but still being under crude Persian rule these blood-stained conflicts will not cease. Many more are still to come. It will take many rounds of civilisation to extinguish the delusions of the crude ruler, who think that all can be won with vehemence and injustice, with deprivation and misuse of assets, rulers that are not acting in concordance with the Higher Law. Even after the arrival of the One God amongst us, a time close at hand - if we may believe the prophecies of our Jewish brothers - many wars will still be waged, and the



last war will stain red all the waters of the world. Still, the time will arrive that Mankind is united, and has expelled all crude rulers. The means to achieve this, however, should be in concordance with the rules of our thought, which, in short, amount to moderation and deep understanding of the workings of Nature. As I told about the Light and the Abyss, one should always remember that the individual also carries in itself the same tendencies of the Universe: He strives to the Light, but will always carry the Shadow of the Abyss with him. Thus be moderate in your aspirations, because otherwise your shadow will pull you back.” Hermes here raised his hand, and said: “Thus understand that besides new heights in human understanding of Nature, the weakness of Man is attaining new depths too. Useless wars will rule the Earth for centuries to come. Still, most people understand the Reason of Heart and Head, and the nurturing force of Nature. Remember that iniquity is in the hands of only few, but moderation and reason the attitude of many. Unfortunately, the mean few can more swiftly destruct which the benevolent are able to rebuild. Also this is true that the Mind of Nature will find remedies against mankind, if mankind will start to act as a burden to Nature: Nature restrains Nature!” These words elicited a long silence, after which Hermes invitingly gestured towards the dining room, saying: “Our victuals are ready. Let us nurture our frail bodies for a while, and then proceed to the Axiom of Vibration in the afternoon sitting.

During dinner I seated myself beside Menander of Corinth. He instantly asked how Athenocritus was doing. I informed him he was well, and much absorbed in matters of local governance. Menander mentioned he was celebrating his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, and asked if I would like to join him in the tavern this evening with some of his friends. I accepted, and then we discussed about the Temple of Apollo, and whether he was already initiated. He stated that his course was a tentative part of his priesthood at Delphi. As interpreter of the Pythia, he needed to learn many languages. Besides being in the course of Lord Hermes, he was having classes in

Syriac and Arabic. Then Menander asked many questions about the atoms, and I informed him about most of the theories, although I also pressed that they were still very frail, having had many conflicts about it with Leucippus.

Thus we proceeded to the afternoon lessons. Hermes had placed himself before his high chair, and we were all sitting on the floor again. He proclaimed:

*Nothing rests;  
everything moves;  
everything vibrates.*

With this he was waving his hands slowly to make his words more incisive. “The apprentice who understands the Axiom of Vibration has grasped the sceptre of power. It says that motion is manifested everywhere in the Universe. Nothing is at rest, everything moves, vibrates, and circles. This principle is recognized by some of our Greek philosophers here present,” - here he glanced in my direction with a little smile - “and they try to emulate it in their systems. Unfortunately, it will be still outside the grasp and understanding for centuries, due to the predominance of thinkers outside our ranks. Still I’m confident that the physical sciences will re-discover the truth sometime. In fact, there is much to be learned from vibrations. Many already know that Music is all about vibrations, as Pythagoras has shown. Thus, one can draw the parallel even further: all manifestations of thought, such as emotion, reason, will or desire, are accompanied by vibrations, a portion of which radiate outwards and which tend to affect the minds of other persons at a distance. It is like reverberation, as seen with musical instruments. I will show this to you.”

It seemed our Master had also some sense of humour, because he disappeared into a side room and appeared with two instruments in his hands. One was a trumpet, and the other a small lyre. The lyre he put

down onto a wooden cabinet. He said: "Close your ears firmly when I sound the trumpet, then open them when I raise my hand."

We all put our fingers in our ears, or our hands on our ears, and we heard faintly a burst of the trumpet. Then, when he had raised his hand, and we had removed our fingers from our ears, we clearly perceived the same tone, sustained by the lyre on the wooden cabinet. It was Manetos, one of his young promising pupils, who said: "My mother made a wine glass sing by use of her own voice in the same way. The vibrations of the trumpet are carried through the air, and taken up by any other object that has the same tone."

"Quite so, as Democritus would say - may I quote you on this?" he asked. I nodded affirmatively, and Hermes continued: "The atoms in the air take up the vibrations from the trumpet, they impinge on the lyre, and it will resound with the air atoms. Then the tone is amplified by the wooden cabinet. Wouldn't you say so, Democritus?"

"That is about it, yes," I said.

"So, this is the principle which also produces the mental influence, that thoughts travel and are picked up by others. Truly, if I have a certain tune in my mind, it will be soon picked up by others who also know it. So, every thought, emotion or mental state has its corresponding strength of vibration, and by an effort of the will of the person these mental states may be transferred just as a musical tone may be transmitted by reverberation. This is how the principality of the Spirit imprints itself everywhere in the universe on everything that is in tune with it. This can equally well be applied to the *inner* Mind: by tuning your mind in any degree you wish, you may gain control over your mental state and mood. In this way you may affect the minds of others too, producing the desired mental states in them. This power of course may be acquired only by serious practice, which is done in the second part of our course. The art of Mental Transmutation, however, you should all keep in the mind as the most important tenet of our Art, in which the higher principle is used

against the lower one. Thus, I say again: He who understands the Axiom of Vibration, has grasped the Sceptre of Power."

In this way the second day had come to an end. When we left we made a small walk through Hermopolis. We circled the famous Temple of Tehut, and finally arrived at Menander's house. From there we continued to a roadhouse where his birthday was celebrated in the company of a large number of his friends.

#### IV

The third day appeared to turn out rather awkward for me and Menander. We were quite tired and ill, due to the long proceedings of the previous night with plenty of food and wine. It appeared that Hermes III had set on teaching nearly all his other axioms on exactly this uncomfortable day. "Surely, the axioms of Tehut are only the verbal part of the theory, which are quite short anyway," he said. "However, the real teachings are on the *use* of it, how to bring it in practice. The end result, the ability to transmute Mind and Matter, is only attained by a few, maybe one or two of your lot. Here he looked upon Menander and me with a sign of disappointment.

Still, he energetically proceeded with his discourse. "We will start today with the Axiom of Polarity." He demonstratively rose from his high chair again and recited in a dignified manner:

*Everything is dual, everything has poles;  
everything has its pair of opposites.  
Still, like and unlike are the same:  
opposites are only different in degree,  
but identical in nature.  
Through this extremes meet:  
all truths are but half-truths,  
and all paradoxes can be reconciled.*

“As you all know by experience, there are two sides to everything. My teachings are directed to explaining that differences between things diametrically opposed to each other are only a matter of *degree*. Everything is relative and pairs of opposites may be reconciled by proper understanding of the Axiom of Polarity. I claim that this rule may be illustrated everywhere, starting from the examination of the nature of things. Firstly, Spirit and Matter are also but two poles of the same thing, and together with the intermediate planes they are merely degrees of vibration along an axis that spans all phenomena of nature, from *the* Law to laws, from *the* Principle to principles, from infinite mind to finite minds. I’m sure Democritus could have much to tell about the phenomenon of Hotness and Coldness as being identical in nature, the differences being merely a matter of degrees of vibration of atoms, but I think he will today be quiet.”

Everybody glimpsed in my direction, and I was forced to make a statement: “I humbly excuse myself. I have been late in a party, and will rather not speak today, but what our Master says about Hotness and Coldness I can confirm.”

Hermes nodded at me from his high chair, and continued in his normal way of speech: “So also for the terms ‘high’ and ‘low’, which we are compelled to use so many times, they are but poles of the same thing, as well as East and West: If you travel around the world in an eastward direction, and come to China, where I once have been, you will reach a point that can be reached also by travelling Westward, and why is that, Tat?” he then asked from his son.

“Because the world is an orb,” Tat said in his characteristic shrill voice.

“Quite so! The same with Light and Darkness: they are poles of the same thing, with many degrees between them. Even in the dark, you will, after sufficient time, be able to see something. The same we can say about Noise and Silence; Hard and Soft, Sharp and Dull. Most importantly, Good and Bad are not absolute either. Maybe we can say that no God can

be worse than Seth, and no God more benevolent than Amun-Ra or Osiris, but also the forces of Good and Evil will, in due time, be reconciled.”

One of the pupils asked: “What do you mean with this, master?”

“I mean exactly what I say, as I stated on the first day: namely, that at the end of the Divine Comedy of Time ALL opposites will be reconciled, when the Divine Creator draws back into himself all his creations.”

This was something that had to sink in for a while, but then Hermes continued about the rule of Opposites. “When we look at the Mental Plane, the important opposites are Love and Hate. They are generally seen as diametrically opposed to each other and irreconcilable. But when we apply the law of polarity, we find that there is no such thing as absolute love or absolute hate, separate from each other. The two are merely terms applied to the two poles of the same thing: degrees in Affinity, or degrees in Wholeness. As every human being strives for wholeness, he seeks that what is lacking in him in another person. We will return to this when we speak of the axiom of Gender, which is to be seen separately from that of Polarity, but there are degrees of love and hate, and there is a point in the middle where Like and Dislike become indiscernible. Courage and Fear come under the same rule. When you fear things, you must focus on things that encourage you. Thus, the rule of Tehut enables you to transpose one mental state into another, along the lines of Polarization, by recognising the trajectory that unites the opposites, and along which you can then move. So, things belonging to different classes cannot be transmuted into each other, but things of the same class may have their polarity changed. Thus, a fearful man can raise his mental vibrations along the line of Fear towards Courage, and become filled with Fearlessness. Truly, the occult phenomena do not reveal themselves to persons who have a natural fear for them. In this, fright works as a shield, a natural one that should not be forcibly torn down. Especially for this reason, the secret teachings are not to be given to all, but only to those few who have already some inclination

for it, and are not alarmed by the encounters of it in their daily life. Still, it is good to know that dread of the occult does not in any way devalues the individual, and they should not be forced upon him. On the other hand, for the lazy man transmutation may be advisable, and indeed by this process he may change himself into an active, energetic individual, simply by focussing his mind on new goals. So much for this subject - Is there anything to ask?"

Of course I was very silent, although there were many questions rising in my head. Sometimes it all sounded a little bit too obvious, but then many things were presented in a novel way. It was then that Menander dared to put forward a question: "If you talk about transmutation, how do we even begin to understand this, let alone to apply it?"

"This is clearly a subject on which we will need practical training, but when you grasp the law of Polarity, it is seen that the mental changes are effected by putting the will towards a change of polarity, that is: focussing your mind - through meditative effort - on the opposite quality, proceeding through logical intermediate stages and, of course, in the context of the problem. Thus one can, as it were, slide along that scale, through intermediate solutions in the direction of the desired state. We will go through examples of your own concern in the course of the second stage of the teachings."

Our teacher then rose from his chair and said: "We will now keep a little break, and continue in an hour. You are all free to make a little walk in my garden, which is through *that* door." He pointed in the direction of a wooden door, behind which we had never been able to glean, but which apparently lead into an exquisite garden, enclosed by a high wall of sandstone. When we went there, we were all quite enchanted, and I encountered my teacher after a small stroll. He said: "This is one of the fruits of my visit to China. As they see it, the noblest thing a human being can do is to create a new Garden."

“With us, in Thrace, we see that the noblest thing a man can do is build a new music instrument.”

“Ah, is this really so? And have you made a new instrument?” Hermes III asked.

“No!” I answered briskly.

After our little break, I felt already much better, and Hermes entered on the axiom of Rhythm. Standing again before us he recited:

*Everything flows out and in;  
everything has its tides;  
all things rise and fall;  
the pendulum-swing is manifest in everything;*

Then he sat down on his little throne again, and started again a lengthy explanation: “As you will have noticed, this axiom is derived from combining the law of vibration with that of polarity. Still, it must be treated in its own right. I will be short about this, and then enter on the axiom of Causality. To every action there is a reaction, an advance and a retreat, a rising and a sinking, as manifested in all spheres of the Universe. It manifests itself in Universes, Suns and worlds, down to men, animals, plants, and minerals. It is found in all the forces, in spirit, mind and matter. The creation and destruction of worlds, the rise and fall of nations; the life span of all things, and finally the mental state of Man all conform to this principle. In India they refer to the inhalation and exhalation of Brahma, and - indeed - universes are created by an expansion and a contraction. I carry the rule a bit further, and state that its manifestations and influence extend to the mental activities of Man too, and that it accounts for the bewildering succession of moods, feelings and other annoying and perplexing changes that we notice in ourselves. Thus, all fashions, governments, and nations, yea, even the greatest philosophies and creeds have their limited lifetime. As we study the operations of the axiom of



Rhythm, we will learn to escape from its malicious effects by Transmutation. My forefathers have long since discovered that while the law of Rhythm itself was invariable, it was ever to be evidenced in the two planes of mental phenomena, there being two general planes of Consciousness: the Lower and the Higher, the Conscious and the Unconscious. The understanding of this fact enables us to utilise the Act of Neutralization, by which one can raise ourselves above the vibrations of the conscious plane of mental activity into the unconscious plane, so that the negative swing of the pendulum does not become conscious, and therefore will have no effect, because the conflicts are resolved in the ultimately broader sphere of the unconscious. It is something like jumping onto a bridge and let the roaring waters pass below you. You, students, will learn to apply the Law of Neutralization to yourselves, and thus attain a higher degree of self-mastery, a higher degree of self-composure and mental firmness, suitable to help also others to attain the same. If you consider for a moment how much this swaying of the pendulum has affected you in your life, how a period of enthusiasm has been suddenly followed by a mood of depression, or how a period of courage suddenly has been offset by fear. In this process of self-composure, it is primarily the Will, who is in the superior role, although the rule itself can never be destroyed. We can avoid its effects, but it operates nevertheless. Similarly, we can speak of the Law of Compensation or Counterbalance, a term I like better.” After this explanation, he rose from his chair, and swaying his hands from the left to the right he recited slowly:

*The measure of the swing to the right  
is the measure of the swing to the left;  
rhythm compensates.*

He sat slowly down again and then clarified: “You see, the axiom of Rhythm implies a rule of compensation, which states that the measure of

the swing in one direction determines the measure in the opposite direction. This is the rule of *counterbalance*, and it means that the distance from the centre to the one pole is equal to the distance from the centre to the opposite pole. On the physical plane we see many examples of this law. The pendulum I have in my room swings a certain distance to the right, and then an equal distance to the left, and the time for one swing is so constant, that you can neatly measure time with it. In nature, the Seasons balance each other in the same way. The tides follow the same law. I can carry it a little further by stating that a man's mental states are also subject to this law. Yea, man was initially put into existence as the physical result of all the concurring rhythms in the universe, which emanate from the All and the One God. Thus, as a result of the rule of counterbalance, he who rejoices eagerly will suffer eagerly. He who feels but little pain is capable of feeling but little joy. The pig suffers but little mentally, and so also enjoys little, but there are other animals that enjoy keenly, but whose anxious constitution and temperament give cause to a higher degree of suffering. So it is clearly with Man. There are four distinct temperaments in Man, one which permits but low degrees of enjoyment, and equally low degrees of suffering, while there are others who permit themselves most intense enjoyment, but they also suffer the most intense frustrations. The rule is that the capacity for pain and pleasure, in each individual, must be balanced. It is easy to have a great deal of enjoyment in the evening, but if you must concentrate on a difficult course in the early morning and feel awfully bad as a consequence of your overindulgence, you will have noticed that balance is needed, wouldn't you say so Menander and Democritus?"

"Yes, Master, yes," said Menander. I kept my mouth shut, but nodded as a sign that I had understood.

"Not that I want to tease you both, but please remember that these courses, which I give freely, are not meant for pigs, although I am aware that the pigs are the philosophers of the animal kingdom, you are

supposed to become the great sages of the *human* sphere, not that of the animal territory.” Thus, we were again painfully reminded that we were very much out of line.

“This all said,” Hermes continued, “I would like to propose that with applying the Law of Compensation we can go even further, or in fact, reverse the statement: Before one is able to enjoy a certain degree of pleasure, you must have swung first toward the other pole of feeling. Instead of experiencing a certain degree of pleasure first and pay up for it later, one could first experience a certain degree of pain, say by doing some hard piece of work, before one has earned the enjoyment of it, which is generally the fruits of the work. I can even draw this so far that some people, who seem to have a very joyful life, nearly all the time, will have experienced in his previous life much pain. It can also be that he will experience pain in his next life. Doesn’t this throw a new light on the problem of pain?” he then asked.

We all nodded obediently, and were indeed a bit shocked at the purport of his message. I was certainly such kind of person who had seen only sunny days, and was now wondering whether it was the reward for an earlier life of suffering, or whether a very painful life was in store for me in my next life.

But Hermes rambled on about this unrelentingly: “We, the followers of Hermes, the messenger of the One God, regard life as continuous, consisting of a series of individual lives, forming a chain, so that in consequence the rhythmic swing is understood in the way I indicated. The law of Compensation would be meaningless unless one admits the truth of reincarnation.”

I raised my hand and said: “I’m very sorry, Master, but I really have an important question here: Am I allowed to speak?”

“Sure, Democritus, in this affair you are holding much stakes, I notice.” Some of the students giggled, but Hermes raised his hand warningly, saying: “Democritus will ask his question... undisturbed!”

“My whole family has been enjoying life. We never had much trouble, even in the times of the Persian War. Must I conclude we are going to be repaid by much suffering in our next life?”

“Possibly, but maybe your life has still much suffering in store. And to be sure, serious work always pays off too. I see you are still going to do lots of good work in the future.”

This was, of course, a huge compliment on my part, which I hadn’t expected. “So I could avoid suffering in my next life, when I would suffer now, or would do some good piece of work?”

“Indeed, or both, but I am not to judge you, only to *encourage* you. The One God is the final judge of all affairs. No man should judge any other man for this reason, and if he does, it should only be done for correcting an evident, anomalous condition, one that the person may already know himself. Moreover, judgement is needed for aiming at a practical solution, no more. However, we claim that the Master or advanced student is able, to a great degree, of escaping the swing toward pain, by the process of Neutralization as before mentioned. By rising on to the higher plane of the Self, much of the experience that comes to those dwelling on the lower plane is avoided. The price, however, is a great deal of toil, because to rise on this level requires a great deal of mental work. Still, I would say that the law of Compensation plays an important part in the lives of men and women. It will be noticed that one generally pays the price of anything he possesses or lacks. If he has one thing, he lacks another - the balance is lost. No one can keep his drachma and have the honey at the same time - wouldn’t you say so, Democritus?”

I nodded obediently.

“Everything has its pleasant and unpleasant sides,” Hermes continued. “The things one gains are always paid for by the things one loses. The rich man possesses much that the poor man lacks, while the poor man often possesses things that are beyond the reach of the rich. The latter may have the inclination toward feasting, and the wealth wherewith to secure all the

dainties and luxuries of the table, but he frequently lacks the appetite to enjoy it. Still, if it were not for his bad conscience, he envies the appetite and digestion of the labourer. The workman, on the other hand, lacks the wealth and inclinations of the rich, and gains more contentment from his plain food than the rich man ever could obtain, even if his appetite and digestion were not ruined already. With these people, the wants, habits and inclinations differ too greatly. And so it is through life: the law of Compensation is ever in operation, striving to balance and counter-balance, and always succeeding in time.”

“But this is hardly ever *seen!*” some other pupil boldly protested. “What we generally behold in the World is that the rich become richer and the poor poorer, because both get adapted to their conditions so quickly.”

“Indeed, this is well-observed: so it appears to be in this World, and thus it is good that you follow this course, to come to learn it otherwise, because things are not always as they appear. Thus, I repeat that several lives may be required for the pendulum to return,” said Hermes. “With this we come to the last subject of our long day: the axiom of Causality... Democritus and Menander, are you still with us?” We both nodded, sitting up more straight, but it was clear that we had to fight the fatigue. Hermes yet again rose from his chair, and recited, with his typical voice and waving of his arms:

*Every Cause has its Effect;  
every Effect has its Cause;  
everything happens according to Law*

“Here I present the next axiom of Tehut: the rule of Cause and Effect, which embodies the truth that Law pervades the Universe, that nothing happens by chance. What would you say about Chance, Manetos?” asked Hermes.

“That it is either a result of Invisible Law, or an uncountable, large number of causes, having an intractable effect,” Manetos stated.

“Very well put, Manetos. Truly, it can be said that chance is merely a term indicating that a cause exists but is not recognized or perceived; that phenomena are continuous, without break or exception. The Principle of Cause and Effect underlies all logic thought and was declared by us in the earliest days. I think nobody would have anything to add to that, and I think that it very well settles the many and varied disputes between the many schools of thought that have since grown around us, such as about the moving movers, and the Unmoved Mover. Surely, these disputes have concerned the details of the operations of the causal principle, and more often merely the interpretation of words. I believe nevertheless, that the underlying principle of *Cause* and *Effect* has been accepted by all who use the common sense. A little consideration will show you that there can be no such agent as Chance, in the sense of something outside the Law. That there are *obscure* causes, causes that we cannot perceive, causes that we cannot understand, we have to accept. This holds also for another related causal principle: that of synchronic causes, as I had heard from Kun-Fu-Tze, my Chinese teacher. As there is a Law that accounts for events as they evolve at different points in time in one place of the universe, there is also a law that determines events evolving in different points in space at the same time. As he said: time and space are not different, they have the same quality: it’s only so that we are free to move in space, and not in time. Time is merely a direction in space in which we are pushed forward.”

This statement really had to sink in his audience, and he knowingly made a little break in his discourse.

“Some confusion has arisen in the minds of persons considering the causal principle, from the fact that they were unable to explain how one thing could *create* another thing. As a matter of fact, nothing ever causes or *creates* another thing; Cause and Effect deals merely with *events*, something that comes, arrives or happens, as a result or consequence of some preceding event. No event *creates* another event, but is merely a preceding link in the great orderly chain of events flowing from the creative energy of

the All, according the impulse of the three Principalities, as mentioned yesterday. There is not only continuity between all events precedent, consequent and subsequent - as the redoubtable Heraclitus said: *Panta rhei* - but there is an additional relation existing between events that occur at the same time at different places of the Universe. Although we would experience this as non-causal, it is the same principle from the viewpoint of the All. Here in our quarters we hardly understand this, but as the Chinese see it, and as I have come to see it by the study of coincidence, I have become fully convinced.”

Seeing our heads nodding again, overcome with weariness, Hermes stepped down from his lofty chair, and said: “I suppose this concludes our lessons of today. Tomorrow we will go into the last axiom: that of Gender. I bid you all a peaceful goodnight.”

Indeed, it was already long after sunset when I returned to my lodgings, and I fell almost directly asleep.

## V

After a dreamless night, I rose early in the morning and I was all ears again on the fourth day of instruction in the general axioms of Tehut. Hermes informed me he would embark on the Principle of Gender soon, but he first fancied to give an exposition of the matter of the Free Will, as related to the Laws of Causality.

“I wish to enter into a consideration of the Free Will, because it was left out yesterday as it was such a late hour. There is much controversy about the Free Will as opposed to the Rule of Fate, nowadays. In fact, one should rather consider both Freedom and Fate as lying on opposites along the axis of causality, according to the principle of Polarity. That a man may be both free and yet bound by necessity no-one will deny. The ancients have expressed it as follows:

*The further the creation is from the Centre,  
the more it is bound;*

*The nearer the Centre it reaches,  
the nearer to Freedom it is.*

“This is related to the Will that conquers Chaos, and the Will always balances on the cutting edge between Chaos and Order. The majority of people are more or less the slaves of heredity, environment, governmental rule and custom, and exhibit very little freedom. They are swayed by many opinions, customs and thoughts of the outside world, and so they are swung by their emotions, feelings and moods. They have no self-control of any kind. Still, when they hear this assertion, they angrily say: *What do you mean?! I can choose to do as I please! I do just what I want to do.*’ When they say this, however, they fail to explain from where the *choosing* and *wanting* has its origin. What makes them *‘want to’* do one thing in preference to another; what makes them *‘choose’* to do this, and not something else? The Master can change these *‘choices’* and *‘wants’* in others, who are at the opposite end of the mental pole. He is able to will his own will. The One God even, by his all-pervasive Will, created what was not there. However, the majority of people are carried along like falling stones, obedient to all influences without resistance on their part, without the exercise of the Will. The main purpose of our course - which is just at the start - is to come to know the *rules of the Will*, and be able to rise above the plane of material life: you will place yourself in touch with the higher powers of the divine nature. This is a nature, in which will-power is predominant: you are able to will your own moods, shape your own character, nourish your own qualities, as well as shape the environment around you by becoming Movers, instead of becoming mere pawns, which are moved by others. Of course, as a Master you do not escape the Causation of the higher planes, but by falling in with the higher laws, you will master conditions on the lower plane.... Are there any questions at this point?” There were no questions, mainly because we were all pondering feverishly what we would become, willing whatever we wanted to will and whether we would, in the end, become Masters of Willing.



“I’ll now enter on the important subject of this day: the principle of Gender.” In his characteristic poise, he recited:

*Gender is in everything;  
everything has its Masculine and Feminine side;  
Gender manifests on all planes.*

“As I have spoken earlier about the powers of the three Principalities, one other image of the seal of the spirit is Gender. I can now bring in the following fact, namely that every human being strives for wholeness, and that he seeks in first instance in another person what is lacking in him, just as each Principality does. It must be said that such condition is only fulfilled rarely in the mortal life of Man. I have found only few persons who have found wholeness in another person, but more important is that you shall find wholeness within *yourself*, and then do not become mentally slaves of other persons... What is the name of your spouse, Democritus?” he then suddenly asked.

“Kundris, master,” I said.

“A Chaldean, isn’t she?”

“Yes, Master,” I replied.

“You are very lucky: as I understand, she is well versed in Orphic lore and has proposed to you to come here, hasn’t she?”

“Yes, Master,” I replied, wondering if he might have got this information from someone, or whether he just made a lucky guess.

“Then listen close to what I have to say about the matter of Gender,” he said. “Some people have a very rich inner life; blessed be those, because they have much to give to others. The waters of their soul are sufficient to bring to blossom even the barren desert of the lost souls of their fellow men. Such it was intended. Thus, the axiom of Gender means that there is gender present in everything. The Masculine and Feminine principles are ever present and active in all phenomena and creatures, as they flow directly from the Pure Spirit, impinging on the abysmal Water, and making

it pregnant. This is true for the *Divine Company of Eight*, of which my forefather, Tehut, was the head, and it is also true for the smallest creatures in the world, maybe even for the atoms, wouldn't you say so, Democritus?"

"Yes, Master, I would," I affirmed.

"Good! I will soon return to this," Hermes enthused. "At this point I think it well to call your attention to the fact that Gender is not the same as Sexuality, although clearly it is one of the strongest manifestations as we commonly experience it in life. The necessity of sexuality will be clear to anyone, otherwise we would not be obediently sitting here, listening to the Master who says this." Here he blinked an eye to his son Tat. "However, Gender has a much broader application: the function of Gender is generally to create new things. Firstly, we find a distinct manifestation of the Principle of Gender among the atoms. If I'm correct about Democritus' explanations, the atoms constitute the basis of all matter, and they are capable of forming endless combinations, as he says, so that it explains all the complexity of life around us. It is the source of all order we see around us, otherwise all would be chaos. I feel very much inclined to the same view, and I wouldn't be surprised if the behaviour of atoms would be in line with the most ancient teachings of Tehut, which have always identified the Masculine and Feminine principle of Gender to coincide with the principle of Polarity. In the end it is all about the formation of organisms that feel themselves *whole*, having become whole by sharing something they have in common, but also completing in each other things they lack. We, as human beings, are split, as if a primeval axe has cleaved us in two parts, and we strive to become one again. This is the main thing when a person *falls in love*: he has discerned something he has missed. This is a very strong force, which no-one should underestimate, neither ignore. The role of the Masculine principle seems to be that of directing a certain inner force toward the Feminine principle, and thus starting the process of creation. The Masculine principle is always the one

doing the active creative work, and this is so on all planes of life. And yet, each principle is incapable of operative energy without the assistance of the other. In some of the forms of life, the two principles are combined into one organism. For that matter, everything in the organic world manifests both genders. There is always the Masculine present in the Feminine, and the Feminine in the Masculine.”

At this point he rose from his chair again and directed himself to us at a shorter distance. “The first aspect of Mental gender is the Passive and the Active mind, much connected to the Masculine and Feminine. Both are equally important, and both qualities should be in everyone. The second aspect of the Mental Gender is that of Objectivity and Subjectivity, Reason and Dream. Both are equally real: no-one can live in mere objectivity. If we were all to become addicted to the machinations of the material world, our Mind would die. There would not be any creation, not any Music, no building, no picture, no sculpture. On the other hand, becoming addicted to fancy and dream is equally threatening to the Mind, because there would be no impetus, and thus no realisation and confirmation of an idea. That’s why we all need sleep: during the objective day under the bright sun, our Mind gets burdened, as the body gets weary, and thus it needs to flee in dream in the night, as if to live thousand-fold, to bring fresh ideas to the morning. This is a manifestation of Mental gender. Another aspect of Mental Gender is the Conscious and the Unconscious mind. As the word says: Unconscious is really unconscious. We cannot observe it, but still we should acknowledge its existence. We will see later how they are represented in the Three Spheres of Being: that of the Mind-body, Soul and Spirit.”

At this point he rose and beckoned us all to go out into the garden again. We were seated there under the oil palms, shielded from the burning sun of high noon for a little while, and then had our victuals for the day. His table was always richly laid out, also with foodstuffs that were entirely

unknown to me. I sat beside our teacher, and asked: “So, you believe in a *single* God, who has created everything?”

“Why do you ask? Didn’t I say so already on the first and second day? This is not a matter of belief, it is *fact*.”

“So you say, and do you believe He is all-powerful, that He can make *anything* he desires?”

“Ah,” Hermes uttered, “and next you are going to ask if he can make a stone that he cannot lift himself, or whether he has a sense of humour, or whether he has made himself a little slave to work for him, or whether he has created his own harem...”

“Such things came to my mind sometimes, but I’d rather ask how one can even start creating when there is *nothing*.”

“You ask how the Logos came into being, and then into the World?”

“That is what I mean.”

“As we all know, the final cause of creation is a mystery. In fact, I will talk about this in the afternoon lessons too, but if I tell you a little in advance, you should see creation as a collision of two separate and immiscible spheres of being: the material, represented by the goddess Isis, and the spiritual, represented by Osiris. At the collision point, the *Sphere of the Soul* is born, like an egg. The Creative and the Receiving spheres meet at a single collision point, and power starts flowing from the higher into the lower, such that order arises in the material world as the soul, and this soul then expands into the material and spiritual spheres. So, as a man lives his life, his soul expands, and at the end of his life the material part dies, but the part that lies in the sphere of the spirit lives on in the spirit.”

“And by which does the Soul grow?” I asked.

“By contemplation, by suffering, by love,” Hermes said, “and also by eating: come on, my dear Democritus, you forget your nourishment.”

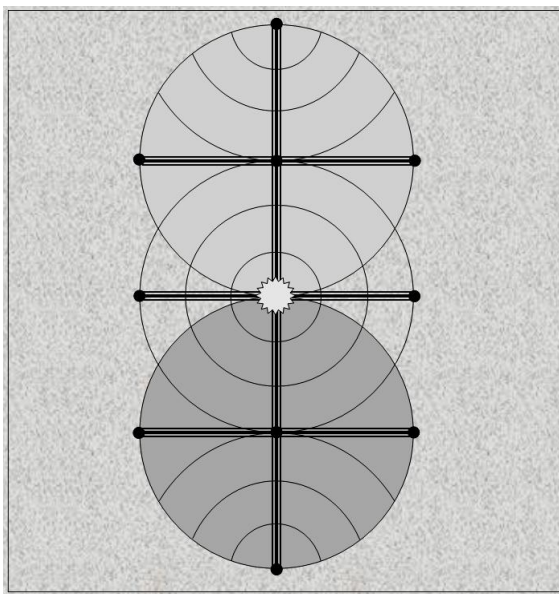
I excused myself, and we ate on. The atmosphere at his house was tranquil and peaceful. His residence was well laid out, all in white marble, with in each room interesting pictures, which were surprisingly simple, and not at all Egyptian. I was filled with a strong feeling of gratification, and Hermes also felt this; he laid his hand on my shoulder and whispered: "Surely, you must enjoy your time here, and use my teachings also in your home country. They have still much to learn there about the principles of Tehut. Surely your Gods, as those of ancient Egypt, were not more than personified reflections of Nature. You have to learn to understand Nature first before you can understand God."

"But I suppose it is all in vain, since you said that the All is unknowable."

"In essence this is so, but still there is *something* you can learn about the Great Creator, as I said by diligently studying Nature. However, it is also a fact that there are things that cannot be known by any man. Some of those, but certainly not all, can be handed down in the secret teachings, but they are intended only for the Wisest and most Fearless among us. So it is that only a small part of us, here gathered around this table, will go to the last stage of the course." I wondered whether I would be admitted to the second phase, but I felt confident that things would go as they were projected to go.

We had all returned to the spacious teaching room, and Hermes carried on with the afternoon part of the general teachings.

"We have now come via the principle of Gender to a small exercise: this is to examine your *Inner Self*. I will soon bid you all to turn your attention inwards, but before you do, I would like to give you all some indications, starting with a wider picture of the Mental Universe, so that you can all start pondering more assuredly on the *Self*." He turned round and walked to the far end of the room, where he took up the following picture:



He explained it in the following way: “Here you see the Three Spheres of Being. Our world consists of the Lower Material Plane, in the lower, dark circle below, which we call *khat*, and it stands for the physical body. Then in the upper, bright circle, there is the Higher Plane of the Spirit, which we call *sab*, the spiritual body. These bodies collide, giving the Life-Light, creating an expanding intermediate plane, the Soul world, the soul body being called *ba*. The connection point is both the origin and point of formation of the soul; we call it *sekhem*, the vital force, here depicted as a star. This is the *Self*. It is quite in the middle and is called *Tiferet* by our wise Jewish fellow-men. Is anybody acquainted with the Sepiroth?”

As nobody else raised his hand, I reacted, and said: “Yes, Master, Lucas of Jerusalem has instructed me in the Kabbalah.”

“So then you know the meaning of these small ten dots on the edges of the spheres of being. So what was *Tiferet*, Democritus?”

“Beauty, Master, between *Chesed* and *Gevurah*.”

“Quite so. The most important plane of the spheres of Life is this one: the *Plane of Compassion*, which spans the line between Kindness and Severity, with *beauty* lying between it as a resolving power, being the essence of the soul. It was beauty that made the One God to start and to complete his creation, and it is represented also in the centre of the soul life, the real Self. Now, if you say *I Am*’ then this means you recognise the existence of an *I* and a *Me*. The *Me* in us thinks of himself as being the constitution of his personality, that he is build up from certain feelings, tastes, likes and dislikes, peculiar habits, connections with his fellow men, and also comprising all his knowledge that he carries inside. This is the *Me* known to himself and others. Many think that the *Me* is physically bound up with the body, and some even think that the clothes they carry are part of the *Me*. Of course this is the greatest nonsense. All the entourage you carry around on this world is in some way part of you, because you, as it were, clothe yourself with your fancies and your taste, and as such to show it to other men. Surely, all your possessions characterise yourself, how you make your stand in life, but in the end there are very few things you would save from your house when it would be on fire. Maybe your dairy, maybe your lyre, or the picture of your parents. All these things, however, are not your real *Self*, even when you have created them yourself, crafted them with your own hands. When, however, you are able to concentrate well, you are able to shed off the possessions and the attributes of the *Me*, and you will notice your *Inner Self*— that is: your soul. Maybe you think that the Self is subordinate to you, but although it is dependent on your own knowledge and efforts, it also rules you and it transcends you and resonates with all those of a like mind. Returning to our earlier subject of Mental Gender: As a person gets born in the world, he is the product not only of a physical joining of a man to a woman, but also of a spiritual joining of the spiritual plane to the material plane, according to this image. It is from this contact point, the star, between the two primary spheres of being that the soul is born. In the course of a person’s life, his soul

expands into the material world and the spiritual world, but it logically also conquers new ground outside these spheres into the realms of the surrounding chaos. As a result of this joining, there is a dual aspect in the mind of every person. The *I* represents the Masculine Principle of Mental Gender, the aspects of being, and the *Me* the Female Principle, the aspect of becoming. In the same way as the Cosmos was formed from the impinging of the Active Principle - the Pure Spirit from which transcended all Beauty, Good, Virtue and Wisdom - onto the Passive Principle - the soulless and motionless Water of the Abyss - so we find at work the same principles in our thought: the Principle of Correspondence operates on this plane just as it does upon the great plane upon which the creation of Universe is performed. Many of you cannot comprehend a *Self*, independent of the body, but it can truly be said that your Mind and your Self also lie outside you, and are procreative even at a great distance. All thoughts, ideas, and feelings can be considered as a *Mental Womb*, for the generation of mental offspring, it radiates out of you, as music radiates from the lyre. Thus, creative energy of the Mind is enormous when the will-power is directed to the right object. For this reason *Severity* lies on the same line. I bid you all to contemplate on this matter, and on the picture before you.”

A long silence entered the premises again and I reflected on the matter profoundly, and realised, also recalling my earlier teachings under Lucas, that there is something in us, a mental force, a power that wants to create, the *I*, the *Self*, and it is possible to stand aside and witness the mental creation, with the *Me*. In me there is an ability to project idea's into matter, and make them real by will-power.

After a long silence Hermes III rose from his seat, he took up his picture and said: “As we have now come to the end of our fourth day, I would like to conclude also in front of this image: *As above, so below; as below, so above*. Thus, by paying attention to analogies that exist between the upper and the lower spheres of being we can comprehend the spiritual



world. When the principle of Correspondence and Gender is understood, we can study all phenomena by observing our inner self in addition to the outer world. I now say unto you: study All and preserve the Good. This is the purpose of the Soul life.” After this he sat back on his chair again and said: “Tomorrow is a free day of study... use it well! After tomorrow we will gather here and you will have a small examination. Then you will hear which of you will be admitted to the Sermons on the Temple Mount, and which of you will become *Men* that have received the Mind, or whether you will remain *Mortals*.”

## VI

For me this concluded the formal studies with the revered Hermes the Third Great. I came for an examination, which I passed well enough. Still Hermes had other plans for me. He asked me to come for a visit and some further discussion, as he had an interesting suggestion. Thus, I agreed to visit him on the same evening. It was a clear night, and we sat in his marvellous second garden, which he had laid out on his roof. For some time we were looking silently at the stars, but then I asked: “Master Hermes, I still would like to ask about the creation process. It is something that I find so important, but also so incomprehensible. It just doesn’t leave me in peace.”

“As you are an ardent seeker of truth, all incomprehensible things must be an utter torture to you. What is then so incomprehensible? That all was made by the One God, the Mind of the All, by contemplation of the All?”

“This you said, but it is still not understood with my reason. Am I then blind and deaf?”

“My dear Democritus, it seems to me that you are neither blind nor deaf, but merely in a restless state of Mind. This is what limits your understanding. You are asking already for the third time this question, and I say to you: You know not what you seek. May I ask what it is you *really*

seek? If you ask about the creation, what *stage* or *part* of the creation do you mean?”

“How, for instance, did in the very beginning the Earth in its entirety appear?”

“By gradual drying up, and when the many Waters got commandment from the Logos that issued from the One God to go into themselves again, the Earth in its entirety appeared, first muddy and shaking, and then, when the Sun shone forth, and without ceasing burned and dried it up, the Earth stood compact in the Waters, with Water all around. The Creator of All thus spoke: Let there be Earth, and let the Firmament appear, and forthwith the beginning of the whole creation, Earth, was brought into existence.”

“Where then did the *Order* grow out of the *Chaos*.”

“Ah! The power of God was already present *in* the Chaos, bound together with unlimited Darkness and the Moist Essence, in the Abyss, didn’t I say so?”

“Yes, master, but *where* and *how* did all the living stuff arise out of dead stuff?”

“As we word it in the Sacred Sermon, which is part of the higher teachings, a Holy Light arose; and from out of the Moist Essence elements were collected on Dry Substance, producing the universal elements of a highly Fecund Nature out of which all living forms of Nature were shaped.”

“How exactly was this done?”

“As our dictum says, the light things were assigned above, and the heavy ones were founded underneath the moist part of the dry substance, and the universal elements of Nature were bounded off by Fire and hanged in Breath to keep them up.”

“What are then these universal elements?”

“They are like seeds, like the combinations of atoms you mentioned. That is why I was so interested in your newly founded theory. Maybe

God's invention was that the Logos, as a light, was shed on the dry substance in the abyss in this way, and took solid form as primordial seeds of Nature."

"Yes, maybe this could be true, but how were the living forms then shaped out of these seeds?"

"As I learned from my predecessor, they were produced by means of the cyclic course of the seven circles of the heavens, the Archons in each circle communicating with these Universal Elements."

"Thus, the life forms, in all their diversity, are the result of the cycles of the heavenly bodies?"

"Yes, and by necessary adaptation to other natural phenomena; is that so difficult to believe? This I also taught earlier. Have you not been listening?"

"But, how do these heavenly bodies then exert their *influence*?"

"The Sun and the Moon exert quite visibly influence on the waters of the Nile, as we can see with our own eyes. Then we have Sirius, and other heavenly bodies that have a smaller influence, but, as we see it, every Ruler by his own proper power brought forth what was appointed to him. Still the workings of the heavenly bodies you see directly in your inner self too, at least that of the sun and the moon. Wouldn't you say that as the sun goes down, you become weary? If the Moon is full you feel trepidation? Is this not the sign that we are all children of the Cosmos?"

"So, I maybe should start to investigate these seeds of life, these universal elements," I pondered.

"My dear Democritus, this is exactly what I thought myself, and I can advise you to go to Persia, and learn the Art of Alchimia. There are many good teachers there, and they might be interested in your theory of the atoms."

"I met Osthane the Persian, who travelled with Xerxes when he invaded Greece. He taught me already much of his art."

"You were on friendly terms with *Xerxes*?" Hermes marvelled.

“My father was more or less forced to bestow hospitality on him - do you not know the story?”

“Only heard rumours, my dear Democritus, for which I have little appetite.”

“The advisors of Xerxes were from various parts of Persia, and Osthanes was my first teacher, after which came Lukas from Jerusalem. Then I studied under Leucippus from my home town, who I had already seen many times when I was a young boy.”

“I see you are on the starting point of your sojourns abroad in pursuit of knowledge. My former pupil Pammenes of Memphis knows much of the practical side of Alchimia, and he could use your ideas for his own good. Maybe you can visit him next, as he has knowledge that you might need in the field of Astronomy. This I see at least as your main ambition in life: to become a *practical* philosopher, in concordance with your stage of understanding.”

“How, Master, do you know about my stage of understanding?”

“From the answers you gave in our little exam. I would take the advice to study on the practical side of life. There is the main lesson to be learned for you. As I said, I see lots of good things coming to you. Although you are still young, you are already much ahead of your time.”

Thus, I concluded my short, but interesting period with Hermes III, with the confirmation that his advice had been good. All in all, it was a time of great inspiration, and of lasting happiness. I left Hermopolis with the feeling of having risen in my understanding at least half a step: a notion of how Man came into being. I set course for Memphis, not yet knowing that this was merely the start of many travels, which took me far into the East. It was thus that Kundris had to wait for me more than two years, before I could return to her.

### 3.

## The Scottish Front

☞ Nigredo ☞

*But, although it is easy to fit any given segment of the past neatly and intelligibly into the patterns of world history, contemporaries are never able to see their own place in the patterns. Consequently, even as intellectual ambitions and achievements declined rapidly during that period, intellectuals in particular were stricken by terrible doubts and a sense of despair. They had just fully realised (a discovery that had been on the air, here and there, from the time of Nietzsche on) that the youth and the creative period of our culture was over, that old age and twilight had set in.*

Hermann Hesse  
*The Glass Bead Game*

### 1



fter leaving the countryside south of Bristol, Richard had quickly resettled in Glasgow, and he had good reason to be satisfied. Besides his work at the city council, where he had uncovered and digitised all kinds of official documents, mostly unimportant, but many rather interesting, and a few even of great historical interest, he had cultivated a new hobby in the realms of alchemy, leaning over the many volumes of the renowned Ferguson collection of alchemical manuscripts in the University Library. The place that had become something of a second home to him and in his duties he could find good use of his newly acquired Latin. One day he had quite accidentally encountered his former love, Dorothea Swan, in one of the corners of the library at a neighbouring reading desk. A few weeks later they had firmly re-established their bonds and Richard had been persuaded to move in with her. The shadows of the past he had definitely cast off.

It was then, on that noteworthy Wednesday evening before Christmas, that there was this happy “Reunion Concert” of former pupils of the Glasgow Music Academy. The event was snugly fit into the inauguration concert series conducted in the newly erected concert hall, which was a huge, dark-grey cube placed on the greens near Kelvin Way opposite the James Watt building of Strathclyde University. The students had baptised it the *Kaaba*, in response to the utterance of city counsellor Mason that this was becoming the *New Mecca of Music*. The concert had taken the whole afternoon and early evening. On the program there had been the *Legends* of Dvorak, and, after the first break, the rarely performed third piano concerto of Tchaikovsky, including the two parts reconstructed by Sergey Taneyev. Then, Sheila had had her turn in some violin pieces by John Williams, Jean Sibelius and Max Bruch, it being for her the first occasion to play as a soloist with an orchestra. After a second break, with plenty of champagne, the concert was concluded with the sixth symphony of Anton Bruckner. Somehow, the whole program had stirred Richard rather profoundly, and he had wondered why he had always remained so aloof of classical music. He realised that his perspective had broadened even further into unknown areas, after he had withdrawn from the transatlantic scientific pipeline and regained his freedom in his home country.

To crown the festivities, Richard had proposed to have a grand dinner in a very small, but distinguished restaurant. It was situated quite near the concert Hall, at the corner of Bank Street and Cowan Street, which was suitably on the way from the concert hall to Richard’s new lodgings. The place had been recently restored in its former glory, after various other restaurants had been occupying the premises for more than a century. It had adopted its original name, *The Provost*, and it had become quickly renowned for its grill and for its genuine French and Scottish menu, although it was also notorious for its price level. It was thus, in the early evening, after the lengthy concert, that a sizeable party, comprising Richard and Dorothea, Pierce and Gillian Farnell, Michael and Sheila Willmore and

Maria and Marco Ferraris, departed from the University quarters in northward direction, warmly dressed, ploughing through the thick snow. Maria and Marco had arrived a few days earlier from Madeira, and they were badly surprised by the terrible blizzard that had come down, although not completely unexpected, certainly with unprecedented vigour on the whole of Scotland, straight from the North Pole. At the same time, the city was disturbed by demonstrations of exceptional scale. Luckily, the whole illustrious party had been able to get through the raging crowd in one piece, and arrived safely at *the Provost*, albeit slightly out of breath. They were all quite hungry, particularly Sheila, who had only taken a few toasts and tea for breakfast and had then the whole day before the concert been too nervous to even think of eating.

“Conditions are developing steadily into anarchist direction here too, it seems: Saint Mungo will turn in his grave!” said Pierce, when they were all hanging their heavy coats in the small corridor.

“Luckily this part of town seems to be a bit more quiet, but let’s hope we won’t see an uprising of the sort they had here in 1919,” said Michael.

“Yes, that one had far-reaching consequences.”

“Hmm... The only parties that seem to get the benefit of all the disarray are the Russian bankers and the Chinese supermarket tycoons,” Maria remarked. “We’ve been roaming the centre for two days now, and hardly think there is any sense in Scotland becoming independent, because half the population is already foreign.”

“Quite true,” said Pierce.

A table for eight was reserved, and when the company had seated, two young men distributed bulky menu lists, bound in leather.

“Do you still have the mixed grill?” asked Richard.

“Of course,” one of the waiters nodded.

“I will take that one,” Richard enthused. “I can recommend this to you all. It is their *piece de resistance*.”

“I’d certainly fancy the mixed grill too,” said Dorothea.

The others had hardly started reading the menu, when Sheila remarked: “Oh! They have salmon with whiskey sauce! That’s what I will have.”

Pierce shrugged his shoulders and grumbled: “*Fish!* Hmm... For me it is already more than a year I have visited a restaurant after this terrible experience. You remember, Gill, in that huge Chinese restaurant in Birmingham?”

“Oh, yes, *Hong Kong Palace*... that was the first time I nearly left a restaurant screaming!” Gill replied.

“Oh? What on earth happened there?” Richard asked.

“We had both ordered a *Hong Kong half fried fish*, as it read on the menu. So, when they brought us both the dish, there was a whole fish on the plate, with vegetables and noodles and all, but then I saw that its mouth was still moving!” said Pierce.

“It wasn’t *dead* yet?” asked Richard.

“A little bit more than half of the poor fish was fried in oil, but the head section and a bit below was still alive. It seems to be a popular dish in Hong Kong, and they make it from a live fish, which they take from an aquarium with a sturdy glove. Then they hold the tail part in boiling oil for a few minutes, and serve it with garniture when the mouth is still gaping.”

“Terrible!!” Sheila exclaimed.

“I complained to them that they should have explained this a bit better on the menu, and that we wouldn’t pay!” said Pierce.

“And you have to tell us this just *now*, right before our *own* dinner?” Marco Ferraris protested.

“I’m awfully sorry,” said Pierce.

“Well, I can ensure you, mister Ferraris, that the fare of this establishment is fully lifeless,” said Richard.

“That’s OK. I think I’ll take the chateaubriand,” said Marco. “Looks safe enough.”

“I’ll take the pork with Cumberland sauce,” said Michael.

“I’ll have that one too,” said Gillian.



When everybody had ordered, Maria and Pierce also preferring the mixed grill, they all decided to start with the French onion soup.

“Certainly beats our place,” commented Sheila, looking around a bit during a silent moment in which the party acclimatised.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. Your Inn has quite an extraordinary ambience, and the pies and beetroot hash are pretty good. They don’t have *that* over here,” Richard praised. He was still thinking of how to bestow some compliments on the family that had more or less saved him from the gutter, while he had wronged them so much in the past.

“I must admit that we thrive well on our home-grown vegetables and meat,” said Michael. “Our pies go down particularly well with the town folk.”

“I guess many people must be envious of your farmhouse and the cows and your exceptional level of self-sufficiency,” Dorothea remarked.

“Aye,” said Sheila, “unfortunately it is quite as George Elliot wrote: *a farmhouse is a fine thing for them as look on, an’ don’t know the liftin’, an’ the stannin’, an’ worritin’ o’ th’ inside, as belongs to ‘t.*”

“I can surely confirm that,” said Pierce. “Still, I’ll be happy to come and farm again for a while, when Gillian is off to Russia!”

“Good idea,” said Gillian, “because I might stay on quite a while, improving my Russian.”

“Anyway, you’re most welcome to our place, all of you, particularly when the imports get badly jammed again,” said Sheila.

“After the last developments in France with these massive strikes of the farmers, I guess we should get better acquainted with the oriental food,” said Richard.

“At least the Indian foods have been around a long time in the UK, and have been always of great quality, despite all,” Sheila replied.

Nobody really made a comment on this, and after a short silence Maria asked: “So, when we were introduced in the break you said you attended the Biomaterials conference I organised ten years ago in Funchal. I don’t

remember having made your acquaintance at the time, but you must have been involved in a nasty accident on my cliff.”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“Was it really so that you nearly got your head chopped off during the get-together party?”

“I’m afraid so, yes. All quite terrible it was.”

“I’ve heard everything from Marco and Michael, and we’re all very sorry; about the legislative *snafu*, I mean.”

“Oh, it’s already such a long time ago,” Richard mumbled.

“I’ll not stir the subject any longer. However, you’ve always had our sympathy,” said Maria, who then turned to praise Sheila: “You were really splendid! I knew the music of Schindler’s List and even that particular Humoresque of Sibelius, but that Bruch piece, I’ve never heard it before.”

“Indeed, if I may say so too, a splendid piece of music, and wonderfully played,” said Richard, who was a bit frustrated that his dark past had been brought onto the table, and nearly missed out on an opportunity to compliment Sheila.

“Well, it didn’t feel particularly short for me,” Sheila sighed, “I had to study hard on it, after all these years, and I was terribly nervous when I set foot on the stage.”

“Oh, really? I didn’t notice anything of your stage-fright on the first row,” said Michael.

“Strange, but when the orchestra started it all disappeared, and then with this high note at the end, I was again aware of my stomach turning around.”

“That was a *very* high note indeed!” said Pierce.

Marco asked: “How did such a reunion concert come about? I hardly ever heard such a concert by amateurs.”

“It was one of the present teachers who started it. He called hundreds of former students of the Music Academy, asking them if they would be interested to come and play in a reunion concert, and at the same time

make use of the new concert hall. In the end he even found a few soloists, like poor me,” Sheila explained.

“She needed a lot of persuasion,” said Michael, “That Clive called four times. She said three times no, but then when he called again, she had to give in. More than three times... that’s really something you can’t say no to.”

“Hmm. I rather liked the ambience,” said Maria. “Surely, music is still going strong in Britain. Didn’t we discuss about this last summer, Sheila?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“This Watkinson was very interesting. The last two parts of the Tchaikovsky concerto were new to me,” said Maria, “You ever heard it, Pierce?”

“Well, to be quite honest, I’ve written about this concerto in some detail in my MSc thesis, so if I start on this, I’ll be lecturing the whole evening.”

“You may enlighten us briefly, Pierce,” said Michael. “We have still a whole evening dinner before us.”

“OK. Maybe I should just mention that it was constructed from sketches of a symphony that he had put away for a while. When he fished them later out of his desk drawer he chose to take only the first part as the basis for his 3<sup>rd</sup> piano concerto, which he really intended to be in one part, because he didn’t like the other parts so much. Now, after I heard also the reconstruction of two other parts again today, I’m still convinced that he was right: they don’t *quite* fit in. And then I won’t speak of that oaf of a Simon Bogatyrev, who recreated in the nineteen-fifties the whole so-called *seventh* symphony out of the abandoned sketches. I wouldn’t say it was an uninteresting or un-Tchaikovskian result, but it clearly had - how shall I put it - *Soviet undertones* in the end of the finale.”

“Maybe as a late tribute to the *Great Teacher*?” asked Marco.

“Who knows,” said Pierce lifting his hands up in the air.

“A difficult piece of work, this third concerto,” said Maria: “I’m not certain whether I would be able to get through it from beginning till the end. It seems my fingers are nowadays more adapted to the organ. Didn’t Tchaikovsky commit suicide?” she then asked.

“Allegedly, he did. There is an account that he deliberately drank raw water in a restaurant during a cholera epidemic - can you imagine Gill, as if requesting the waiter: *May I have a glass of cholera, please?*”

Gill shook her wavy hair around, and said: “I’d rather not think of it. Otherwise I lose my appetite and the others too.”

“Sorry again there... Anyway, it is very unlikely that he could have contracted cholera in this way. Of course he somehow contracted it, but suicide is deemed very improbable, because his ardent work on new compositions and his lively socialising in that particular time span didn’t point in this direction at all.”

“How so,” said Maria. “The sixth symphony is rather gloomy, and the last part is almost like a requiem.”

“Yes, of course he had some serious fits of anguish earlier, as is clear from his diary, but he had just travelled to Britain where he got his honorary doctorate in Music at Cambridge - and in London he met Saint-Saëns, Boito and, in fact, Sheila’s favourite composer Max Bruch. Then, back home, he was coaching Rachmaninoff, who’s Aleko he had just heard and of which he was very impressed. The aristocracy adored him in all places where he went. No, no, he was going strong.”

“Was there not an account that he was convicted by his former fellow law students to take poison, because he had homosexual relations in high circles?” asked Maria.

“This has been proven incorrect already quite some time ago,” said Pierce. “To be ranked as typical twentieth century idolatrous fantasies of biographers.”

“Oh, I see... So, what killed him in the end?” Maria asked.

“He had already quite well recovered from the cholera, but it was the after-effects that killed him, his kidneys failed,” Pierce concluded.

“Hmm... Unfortunate soul. Dying in his early fifties,” Maria mumbled.

“Yes, it’s a pity,” said Pierce.

“Dear old Max at least lived a long and prosperous life,” Sheila mumbled silently.

“Yes, and he must have spent a few years in England too, in Liverpool in the 1880’s, wasn’t it?” asked Maria.

“Yes,” Sheila nodded. “That’s correct.”

Richard unexpectedly inserted: “I found, during my work at the city council some documents that revealed that he stayed also here in Glasgow for a while, in fact, exactly in this place, when it was still a hotel. He must have been negotiating about the foundation of a symphony orchestra and Conservatoire here, as well as in Edinburgh. In the end, all the plans failed, because in Edinburgh they lacked the talent, and in Glasgow the money - or was it the other way around.”

“I’ve heard about those plans too,” said Sheila, “but, as it turned out, there was already quite high-level music education here, and when in 1890 the Music Academy was separated from the commercial school, it clearly was a pointless attempt of Bruch to set up a separate Conservatoire in this town.”

“So, must I understand you have *something* with Bruch?” asked Richard.

“Well, yes... Quite funny actually that a German composer – some say a second-rate composer, which *infuriates* me – could write music that was so utterly Scottish in feeling. Wouldn’t you agree, Richard?”

“Based only on this small piece, I would say that it had something of the misty lowlands, but I’ve even not heard the Scottish Fantasy yet,” said Richard, who had been - indeed - attentively reading the programme notes of the concert. “Anyway I was somewhat surprised he had been staying here in this hotel so long.”

“So... this has been a hotel?” asked Marco.

“Well, in the time *The Provost* was more what we would now call a B&B place,” Dorothea explained, “but many notorious persons were lodged here. John Galt wrote the larger part of his novel *The Provost* in this house, on the second floor, just before moving to Canada. That’s what the place originally took its name from.”

“Ahaa... but who is John Galt?” asked Marco.

“A quite well-known Scottish writer,” said Sheila. “He was born in Irvine, quite close to Muirkirk, where I grew up. I know some of John Galt’s novels. If I remember correctly, *The Provost* is a rather witty treatise on political ambition and treachery.”

“Then there was George Eliot, who had been lodged here for a few nights when she was doing some research on the Methodists for her novel *Adam Bede*,” Dorothea added.

“Ah... Well, then we are in good company, it seems,” said Dorothea.

The onion soup was brought in and for a while everybody was quietly eating. To break the silence, Richard returned to the subject of music. “Never had any appetite for classical music, but this symphony of Bruckner was quite lovely: there was a pleasant pastoral feeling about it.”

“Suitably short too, and it was the only symphony he didn’t overly revise,” said Pierce.

“Was it true that he was always chasing young girls when he was already over fifty?” asked Maria, coaxing Pierce again.

“He must have neatly proposed to young girls quite a few times, yes,” Pierce replied.

“So these aren’t twentieth century idolatrous fantasies of biographers,” asked Maria.

“No, no, not at all,” said Pierce.

“I seem to be a lucky guy, finding my old love back at sixty one,” said Richard blinking his eye in the direction of Dorothea.

“Indeed Richard, better keep that well in mind,” said Sheila, wagging her notorious insignitor.

"I'll do that Ma'am," Richard nodded obediently.

"So, how did you two actually meet again?" asked Maria.

"At the university library," said Richard.

"We first met when I was ten years old, on the old Shielings, and we were in school together for a few years," said Dorothea.

"We had much contact later on too, when I was studying at the university here," said Richard, "but then we lost contact."

"Better say that you suddenly *disappeared*," said Dorothea, "as if the earth had gobbled you up, leaving me wondering where you might have gone!"

"Hope you don't mind me prying," Sheila inquired, "but I believe you must have been married?"

"Sure, but that was a long time ago and it didn't last very long," said Dorothea with a little nod, "David he was called - he was the most lazy and absent-minded guy in the world. Sweet too, but... well... after two years of coaching, I finally gave up."

"So, what did it in the end?" asked Sheila.

"The chicken wings."

"The *what*?" Sheila laughed.

"The whole day I had been on the mobile phone telling him to take the ready-made chicken wings out of the freezer. Then I phoned him an hour later to put it in the oven - '*Yes, yes dear,*' he said all the time in this typical no-worry voice. Then, at seven in the evening I came home from work, near starvation, and guess what? The package was still in the freezer, but the oven - the *gas* oven - was turned on, and he'd slipped out to the pub... Well, we had such a row that even the neighbours got worried."

"O boy," Maria giggled, "I think I recognise the situation."

"Mouth shut!" Marco hissed.

Everybody laughed cheerfully and enjoyed the splendid soup. Waiting for the main course, it was Richard's turn to forward a few questions to satisfy the most urgent part of his inquisitiveness.

"How is the *Tree* doing?" he asked from Maria.

“Fine, bore some fruit again.”

“What does it look like?” Richard asked.

“A bit like pomegranates.... green, reddish here and there.”

“You tasted it?”

“No, we wouldn’t *dare*,” said Maria.

“And *our lady* is still safely resting... in her trunk?” asked Michael.

“Sure. We check her out once in a while,” said Maria.

“The cellar was flooded once, and then we needed to check our whole museum rather thoroughly,” said Marco. “Luckily we have a good drain and the water passed away quickly.”

“No signs of life?” asked Richard.

“No, at least she hasn’t come out to taste our wines,” said Maria.

“What are you all talking about?” asked Dorothea.

“We’ll tell you all a bit later,” said Sheila, who was much enjoying her salmon.

## 2

The dinner was in full concordance with, and for some even exceeded, expectations. After desert, glasses of port and cognac were ordered, and Richard asked if the whole party could move to the evening room. Soon they were all seated in a stately room around a large round table, and admiring the massive fireplace from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the reddish mahogany wainscoting. Sheila had been anxious to put forward some questions about Richard’s findings, and now that everybody was saturated and very much warmed up at the sheer sight of the glowing coal in the fireplace, she asked: “Did you find anything worthwhile about the Tilloch family, Richard?”

“I was afraid you would never ask,” Richard replied. “I think I should dwell on this a wee bit, and it may interest Thea too, I think.”

“You can inform her about everything,” said Sheila.

“Me? Why? What is all this secrecy about?” Dorothea wondered.



“Well, it is because of a small request from the Willmores that I have been looking into the lives of the Tillocks of Glasgow, and there is even a connection with John Galt, whose picture, by the way, you can see above the fireplace.”

They all stared at a large dark frame in which a pencil drawing was displayed of a man with curly hair sitting in an easy chair. From the sight of it, nobody would have guessed that this comely figure was the writer of the laconic, Machiavellian novel, from which the restaurant had taken its name.

“A connection between the Tillock family and John Galt?” Sheila repeated.

“Yes. It is otherwise quite well known, this connection, at least for the Scots among us.”

“Oh, I must have skipped some reading here and there,” said Sheila.

“I will return to this in a moment. In all, I have been forced to study quite a lot on the Hermetic Sciences too, and I was in the end a bit in danger of becoming some sort of Casaubon, but in the end, I can certainly agree that there is somewhere a *Key to All Mythologies*, which we are now slowly retrieving in a more tangible way through your precious findings in Madeira, which is a real Hermetic Museum of some sort. And as everything is *going Galt*, as they used to say in the States, this is a fortunate circumstance!”

“Luckily, you didn’t breathe your last in the process, as poor Casaubon did, and on the side you found your Dorothea back, it seems, so you shouldn’t grumble,” said Sheila.

“Quite so, Sheila,” Richard said with some reverence. “Logically, I should start with Alexander Tillock. He was well known in his time as one of the editors of the *Philosophical Magazine and Journal*, which was one of the very first science journals in Britain, dedicated to all sorts of subjects. He must have been a rather versatile person, both having interest in scientific and religious matters. He was the second son of John Tillock, a treasurer

and magistrate here in Glasgow, who also kept a tobacco shop. There was also a *James* Tilloch living here, some eighty years earlier, and he was indeed a botanist and an archaeologist, according to the University records, but I have *not* been able to find any direct ancestral connections to Alexander, unfortunately.”

“Bad luck,” Sheila sighed.

“Still, it was probably intended that Alexander would take over his father's shop, but then he studied at the University here and became interested in the printing process. So, he established a printing firm, leaving the tobacco business to his older brother, Robert. He got married and had a daughter, Elizabeth, but then his wife died rather early. Later he moved to London, and his daughter Elisabeth married the novelist John Galt. It is common knowledge that Elisabeth and John later moved to Canada, and they had three sons, one of which they called Alexander, after his grandfather, and this Alexander Tilloch-Galt became a very influential politician in Canada, nearly as if he was taking *The Provost*, as written by his father, for earnest.”

“Interesting detail I didn't know,” said Dorothea.

“Yes, didn't I say so, Thea? His grandfather, however, is the person we should return to, because he seems to be the last known Rosicrucian adept.”

“Oh, but that is very interesting indeed!” Sheila exclaimed.

“Quite so! Of Alexander Tilloch we know he had a rather ascetic lifestyle. He was known to be a Glassite, keeping Christian services rather in a small circle at the homes of his nearest friends. He initially wrote essays on various biblical and occult subjects, such as a series of articles on *The Prophecies* while he was with the evening paper *The Star*. However, in his later duties to cultivate one of the first scientific journals, we should note that this journal was still called the *Philosophical Magazine*, not *Science Magazine*, because in that time science *was* philosophy. Everybody nowadays with a PhD degree may wonder, although few actually do, why

he is a doctor in philosophy, and not in science. In fact, hardly any PhD-student today has appropriate instruction in philosophy. At least, I didn't have."

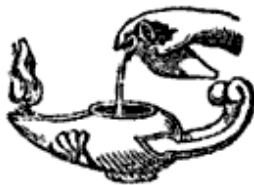
"I have wondered about that too, but they wouldn't bestow the degree of Doctor of Science on me, so I had to settle for the PhD," said Michael.

Everybody sniggered, but Richard continued in his serious voice: "Maybe it seems funny to you, but I believe that, although there was in ancient times too much philosophy without proper support of science, nowadays there has been too much science without proper backing from philosophy."

"Hear, hear!" said Pierce, and he raised his glass.

"Something that David Bohm, our common hero, certainly would have agreed upon," said Michael.

Richard, however, continued his exposition without commenting on Michael's utterings. "So, as I indicated, Alexander Tilloch was dedicated to serious scholarship, but was also highly interested in philosophical and biblical matters. And as we may understand that in that time science was not easily separated from philosophy and religion, it was probably a time in which these subjects were slowly getting better matched, and as a sign to this the *Philosophical Magazine* carried on its front pages the lamp of illumination, or enlightenment." From the inside pocket of his evening suit Richard raised a little book and a whole bunch of papers onto the table and showed a small picture:



"Most interestingly," Richard resumed, "Alexander Tilloch was admitted to a Rosicrucian order, as evidenced from an admission

document to be found in the Ferguson collection of alchemical documents here at the University Library. This paper is particularly interesting.” Richard lifted up another sheet of paper, and started reciting:

*“In the name of Jehovah Elohim, the true and only God manifested in Trinity,*

*I do hereby promise, in the most sincere and solemn manner, faithfully to observe the following articles, during the whole course of my natural life, to the best of my knowledge and ability; which articles I hereby confirm by oath and by my proper signature hereunto annexed.*

*One of the worthy members of the August most ancient and most learned Society, the Investigators of Divine, Spiritual and Natural Truth (which Society, more than two centuries and a half ago, did separate themselves from the Freemasons, but were again united in one spirit amongst themselves under the denomination of Fratres Roseae Crucis - Brethren of the Rosy Cross - that is the Brethren that believe in the grand atonement made by Jesus Christ on the Rosy Cross, stained and marked with his blood for the Redemption of Spiritual Nature, having thought me worthy to be admitted into their august society, in quality of a Practical Member and Brother (one degree above a Member apprentice) and to partake of their sublime knowledge, I hereby engage in the most solemn manner.*

*1. That I will always, to the utmost of my power, conduct myself, as becomes a worthy member, with sobriety and piety, and endeavour to Prove myself grateful to the Society for so distinguished a favour as I now receive, during the whole course of my natural life...”*

Here Richard paused and said: “There follow a series of pledges, which I will skip, but at the end it reads:

*To keep faithfully the above articles as I now receive them from a worthy member of our Society, as he received them himself in the Mauritius, I willingly agree and sign the above with my name and affix my seal to the same, so help me God. Amen.*

***In testimony that I have initiated and received Alexander Tilloch Esq. in quality of Practical Member and Brother, a degree above a Member Apprentice, on account of his practical knowledge and philosophical acquirements, I have hereunto set my hand and seal,***

***Sigismund Bacstrom M.D. London April 5. 1797.***”

Richard passed on the paper to Sheila to his right, saying: “You can all read the paper in its entirety yourself. But, I think you will agree that it is a remarkable document, and it clearly puts us on the trail of the Scottish Rosicrucians.”

“Quite remarkable, indeed,” said Sheila, passing on the papers to Michael. “A bit surprising that such a document has been at all preserved, if they were intent on keeping so much secrecy.”

“Yes,” said Richard. “In fact, a similar document was quoted in the book *The Real History of the Rosicrucians* by Arthur Waite, where we learn that Sigismund Bacstrom was admitted into the same order by the Comte de Chazal on the Island of Mauritius on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 1794.”

“Interesting fact too,” said Pierce. “Must I conclude that these Rosicrucians all lived far away from the continental rush on small islands?”

“No, I don’t think so, but they were keen travellers and explorers. Sigismund Bacstrom is described as a physician from Scandinavian origin, but was likely born in Strasburg. He must have travelled a lot as a ship’s physician, and even made a voyage around the world in the years 1791-1795, during which he produced a large collection of maps and neat drawings of indigenous peoples. He also wrote an account of a voyage to Spitzbergen. He must have lived long in Amsterdam, but finally settled in

London, where he joined with Alexander Tilloch. Of the Comte de Chazal it is known that he resided largely in France, where he may have been a pupil of the Comte de St. Germain. And, as we all know, St. Germain stayed in very many places in Europe.”

“But finally also on Madeira, is that not so, Michael?” asked Pierce.

“Well, there was a tomb with his initials in the sanctuary, so I suppose he must have buried himself there,” Michael answered.

Maria nodded her head and said: “To be honest, Michael, we have examined the stone sepulchres last autumn, after our little flood, and it seems there are only the remains of James Tilloch. All the other tombs are empty.”

“Empty?!” Sheila exclaimed.

“I’m afraid so, quite empty,” said Maria.

“Well, that’s an odd finding. What would that mean?” Michael asked.

“Difficult to say,” said Richard. “If I return to this admission document for a while: The things that struck me were, firstly, that this paper proves that the Rosicrucian order is a spin-off of the Freemasons, a thing that has not always been plainly admitted. Bacstrom himself seems to have adhered clearly to a much more liberal view, accepting women as equally well fitted to the order. This was unusual for the time. Needless to say, we are here witnessing the Rosicrucian impulse that lay at the basis of the European Renaissance of the so-called Romantic era. Secondly, the document lists various pledges to the order, such as *not* to interfere in worldly matters, and particularly to allow apocalyptic events take their course as destined. This pledge is a matter of particular interest: namely, in 1823 Alexander Tilloch published a lengthy series of dissertations on the Apocalypse. He argues that the Revelation St. John received on Patmos must have been written down *earlier* than the apostolic Epistles of the New Testament, in the time of the reign of Nero or Claudius. Now, this admission paper demonstrates that the Rosicrucians strongly believed in the Revelation, and adhered to its *historical* explanation. Additionally, the paper says that the Apocalypse is

soon commencing, as St. John keenly stated even in the beginning. Clearly, if in Tilloch's time the Revelation was seen as a true reflection of history, we must be approaching the *end* of it in our present day," said Richard. A deep silence fell.

"Back in 2001 when the two towers in New York collapsed, I was more than once reminded that the Revelation really mentions a new *Fall of Babel*," Richard continued. "Thea, didn't you quote a phrase the other day of the Revelation about the approaching end of the Hedonistic period?"

"Yes, Dicky, it was of the woman Jezebel, of whom it was said that of *the wine of the wrath of her whoredom have all the nations drunk, and the Kings of the Earth with her did commit whoredom, and merchants of the earth from the power of her revel were made rich.*"

"Long live the Pocketeers!" Pierce exclaimed and raised his glass again.

"Can you please be a bit less noisy, Pierce, my ears are starting to ache," Michael complained.

"Oh, but I agree with Pierce," said Richard. "*Quam inique comparatumst, i qui minus habent ut semper aliquid addant ditioribus.*"

"Which means?" asked Sheila.

"From a play of Terentius," Richard said, "complaining about the unfairness that always the poor are forced to give to the rich, as we have seen clearly many times in our own epoch too."

"Maybe the *Way we Live Now* isn't quite the way we have lived before, but it certainly it isn't going to be the way we are going to live *next* year," said Dorothea.

"What do you mean, Thea?" said Richard.

"That sometimes things can't go on as they have been going on," said Dorothea. "That's the main message of the Revelation too."

"But, I dear say, the Revelation is the most controversial book of the Bible," Michael commented, "and I ask why we even bother to try to understand it."

“It is a *crucial* question,” said Richard. “I have come to the opinion that the Revelation of St. John should be interpreted from the perspective of the collective unconscious, seeing it as the history of the time spirit.”

“Is this not a bit unorthodox interpretation, Dicky?” Dorothea commented.

“Aren’t we all subjected to the forces of the manifold ‘isms of political and social life, and compelled to participate... at least to some degree? Otherwise we would become isolated hermits, which suits only few.”

“So what are we to do?” asked Dorothea.

“Not more than being *aware* that the *Zeitgeist*, once wholesome, is now corrupted, and maybe our redemption lies in *exposing* this fact.”

“I think we need to do a bit more than *exposing* facts, Richard,” said Marco. “Wikileaks has exposed a huge amount of corruption, but the ruling class seem to be slack in correcting things, and change their habits.”

“I have wondered about that too. As it reads here in this admission document of Alexander Tilloch, the adepts of the Rosicrucian Order were instructed *not* to use their power to political ends, and although Tilloch was a known benefactor, he willingly chose to direct his funds in a way that wouldn’t compromise his vows.”

“Doesn’t this disagree with the enlightened view of the free will?” Michael remarked. “It is at least in odd contrast with what is written in John’s diary. The Kings and Queens of their order were, as it reads, *subtly poking around* in worldly affairs.”

“Whatever they may have done, it is clear that they have not succeeded all too well,” said Richard. “After we have passed through three economic crises, we are now in the middle of a social crisis, even the UK is faced with disintegration after the EU.”

“All thanks to this *Cameronian Dream* of our former government, which concerned freedom of gossip and profit,” hissed Gillian.

“Better not exaggerate, Gill,” said Pierce.



“I think there’s very little we can do, Richard, other than try to adapt to the new situation, as most people do,” said Michael. “Striving for self-sufficiency, as the good old habit prescribes, is one way. It is much more effective than all these vain protest actions,” said Michael.

“Surely, protests are much needed,” said Richard, “but, if the population is not ready for change, nothing good will come out of it.”

“This Scottish Liberation Front is really *typical*,” Sheila scorned. “What are they all shouting on the streets? *Freedom for Scotland!* Who do they think they are: William Wallace? Freedom for whom, and at whose expense?”

“I suppose their freedom has to be carried by more and more *Chinese* shoulders,” Pierce mumbled.

“Hah!” Michael uttered, “Weird to hear that from *your* mouth, Pierce!”

“OK, OK, maybe I am a bit of a pampered snob, but...” Pierce started.

“At least a very loveable snob,” said Gillian, tapping Pierce on his cheek.

Some around the table giggled, but Pierce was now compelled to make some sort of defence. “At least I have not overly burdened the social system, and I’ve always refrained from judging the common man. Even for some of my friends who were deluded in the economic-political climate of twenty years ago to take oversized mortgages and live like the *King of France*, I have some understanding. However, for all those bankers, economists, and all the leaders of those oversized financial institutions, that *they* haven’t seen this all coming, despite well-founded warnings. And then, after struggling for seven years on end, they haven’t been able to do *anything* about it; that is really something that puzzles me.”

“Well, for me it has at least become clear that our modern credo of the information society has grossly failed,” said Richard. “There are forces at work that even the brightest minds cannot crack.”

“Maybe they had this ideal of turning Europe into one big shopping centre, and that it was only a good thing to get the economy overheated,” said Marco. “We have seen this even on our small island of Madeira.”

“But our modern times have produced also much *good!*” Maria commented, “You cannot run all things down by stating that...”

“You refer to our scientific and cultural achievements, perhaps?” Richard asked.

“For instance, yes. And they have constructed beach resorts, tunnels and good roads on Madeira with EU support.”

“Looking from where we stand now, it seems that money has corrupted quite a lot in many areas,” said Richard. “As I said, the *Zeitgeist*, once wholesome and productive, is now corrupted, and has turned into a ferocious demon. It clearly looks like the beast of the Revelation, which devours the child born from the Virgin as soon it is born. I don’t think I need to prove the point of corruption in the sports arena, with all these betting and doping scandals, and we have seen it now over-clearly in the field of science too, with all these plagiarism cases that have come to light and the misuse of science funding. On the matter of Art I am less informed, but I recall, Sheila, that you have referred to this sometime.”

“Well, Richard, I was actually referring to modern art, and in particular the deplorable fancy and taste of the posh art dealers,” Sheila replied. “Of course this is not really my field, but the extent of forgery that is seen nowadays in the visual arts is dumbfounding, and with respect to modern music I have to say I generally seem to miss the point.”

“I fear that in some musical matters you have to be a bit of an initiate,” said Maria. “You must have followed the line of development. The musical world is like one big tree.”

“Yeah... With some dead branches on it,” Pierce interjected.

“Well, quite a few, indeed,” Maria said.

“As you have this fancy for D  messieux and Messiaen, and played some of their work to me, I have the impression they wrote their scores more for their fellow colleagues than for the public,” Sheila continued.

“Just listen a bit more,” said Maria, “invest time in it, and it will be rewarded. Surely, D  messieux and Messiaen are not that modern. Really,

there is not such a thing as modern music, strictly speaking. Real art is that which deeply probes the time spirit, in Richard's terms, and generally it is a bit *ahead* of time, and what I can see now is some sort of Renaissance coming."

"Still, I have always wondered where the Bachs and Brahmses of today are," said Sheila.

"Well, there are at least lots of Liszts and Wagners around today," Maria replied, "but I understand your concern. Even Basilio, our new parish priest, keeps perplexing me with his hasty critiques. For instance, two weeks ago I had played Jeanne Démessieux's first etude of the opus five set at the end of the service, and he severely scolded me that this music is utterly detestable, and more fitted for a Black Mass. He implored me that I should play music more befitting the House of God. I replied that I merely regarded it as an interesting pedal-exercise, but that it coincidentally suited his sermon quite well, in which he had rambled on for twenty minutes about the pains and torments of Hell. He turned red as a lobster, and after that I have not played Démessieux anymore, otherwise it might have looked like an open provocation from my side."

"Pity, as one of those rare female organ composers," said Pierce, "but to be honest, even some of Widor's and Vierne's music can be rather demonising when played by some of these young organists nowadays. They just tend to *overdo* it."

"In that respect, I think my small revenge will still come," said Maria. Of course, all wondered what she meant, but nobody volunteered to ask.

"Presently, I can only comment on the subject of science and say that many things have grown out of proportion there too," Richard continued. "There are already large numbers of eminent researchers who have complained about this. For instance, the way scientists have to apply for research funding at present is abominable! Without extensive elbowing and lobbying you will get *nowhere*. Now paying bribes is very common, I've heard."

“Yeah!” Michael sighed. “Even in the heyday of EU funding Hartford sent me regularly on lobbying trips to Brussels. Later there were these lobbying *courses*. Then came all these umbrella organisations and you had to lobby with them first, so that they could do the lobbying *for* you... Then they started to take fees, and you had to become a member... You had to pay a penalty when you suddenly, even for good reasons, withdrew your application.”

“I was heading such an organisation once,” said Pierce, with a twinkle of offence, “in the high-time of the Bio-Based Economy, when it was still almost like a religious creed.”

“Yes, as a *two-man-firm*... and it didn’t last long, did it?” said Michael.

Pierce shrugged his shoulders. “Indeed, but it is now a prospering Bio-Waste Economy anyway.”

“Maybe we should still acknowledge these rare breakthroughs we’ve seen in cancer research and regenerative medicine, and, as Pierce indicates, in waste processing, although the energy sector is lagging behind shamefully. In general I agree that the wild growth of funding agencies and, if I may add, scientific journals has not done much good to the advancement of science. There has been a huge amount of duplication and loss of efficiency and quality,” said Richard.

“Yeah, and I really wonder what the evaluators have done with all the ideas they have gleaned from the rejected applications,” Michael added. “They were really not *impartial*, you know. They also posted science applications to the EU, and who knows where their ideas come from. Hartford was one of the first to understand this problem. He insisted that nothing specific and technical should be mentioned in the applications, and rather concentrated on two-stage applications.”

“I am more worried about the *mind-set* of the scientist in general,” said Pierce. “Of course you shouldn’t generalise, but some of those high-brows do not really seem to be capable of serious dialogue.”

“I recall David Bohm cracked down on that problem more than once,” said Michael.

“Maybe better to say he was a notorious *victim* of that problem, as Wolfgang Pauli and Brian Josephson were,” Pierce retorted. “Even hinting that *maybe something might connect us* was enough to be scolded a communist or to get a conference ban, or *worse*.”

“Still, it is rather striking that the Mind-Body dilemma has generally been better understood by quantum physicists than biologists and medical guys,” Michael commented.

“But that is just the whole *tragedy* of the situation,” said Pierce. “Those doctors that you consult deny that there is an autonomous mind, which is the key to the healing of your body. The Chinese knew that already three millennia ago. Now it seems almost proven that the mind is not localised and is capable of autonomous observation and action.”

“If I return to the theme of the fallen Babel, I have noticed that there is a new confusion of speech too,” said Richard, “I mean the phenomenon of code words, of which really nobody even dares to ask what it means. Some of those neologisms have almost Paracelsian allure.”

“Was it not Carl Jung who commented on the modern use of the old *Word Magic*,” added Michael, “charging speech with gloomy terms to achieve goals that cannot be achieved with honest means.”

“Yeah,” Pierce sighed, “and then consider the *use* of scientific results: you see that science has given us more and more bits of data, ever more miniscule, of which the individual can hardly get a clear overall view nowadays, and this despite the plurality of handbooks.”

“So, summing up our concerns,” Richard continued, “you might all agree that it all boils down to how scientific results are *weighed*. It is particularly in the economic and social fields that the policy makers - very naturally - have yielded to the analysis that most closely coincides with their own views, and disregard the many alternative, equally well-founded, visions. *This* has proven to be the weak spot. Five years ago, during the

peak of the debt crisis it was panic politics, running behind the developments, and trying to extinguish the fire with heavy diesel. The fire was put down for a while, but then *again* people in high positions, who could lay their hands on the big money, succumbed to the temptation, and the fire flared up even more strongly, so the Reaganist-Thatcherist and later Cameronian dream of the free, unbridled economy has clearly failed,” said Richard.

“You are true on this point, Richard, but not all people are corrupted by money. Many people have genuine interests, and still do an honest job,” Maria remarked, “and there are definitive signs for the better already in international politics, and in our national strive for self-sufficiency. Also, when they are trying to make NATO the direct instrument of the UN security council, and after the International Criminal Court got its broadened charter, things look already much better in many global affairs.”

“Sure, there are also these positive signs, but there is a new danger of destabilisation. The on-going growth of the gap between rich and poor has not been solved. Global capitalism has proven to be, in the end, a ruthless system of exploitation of human and natural resources, exporting the burdens and importing the benefits, and the results we see now lying naked before our eyes. People are, in the US and Europe, more and more entrenched in their opinions, and serious dialogue and analysis is lacking,” Richard maintained. “I am no great believer in *Sin*, but if there is sin *somewhere*, it is our *collective* sin, our *systems*, and particularly our lack of understanding for people living under completely different circumstances.”

“But what do you then *propose*, Richard?” asked Pierce.

“To get a higher viewpoint. In this respect we have definitively a mission to fulfil.”

“We?” asked Pierce, his eyes opening wide with stupefaction.

“Yes. Sure! This I will explain.”

“Richard, I realise that we gave you a commission, but we wouldn’t like you to go so far as to save the world,” said Michael.

“Well... most of the material you gave me, particularly John’s writings, point in one distinct direction, which is *re-directing the Course of Fate*. This is what he was preparing for, and, for all we know, he might be still pursuing his goals at this very moment.”

“Do you really think so, Richard?” said Sheila, somewhat taken aback.

“I’m quite confident, Sheila, that he is alive and doing well. He was a strong, level-headed person, and definitively up to something of this scale. So, if I now return to the admission paper of our good friend Alexander Tilloch for a while, it mentions this *magnet* for the regeneration of life, which is disclosed in an additional footnote as: *Laying naked at the same time our universal microcosmical subject, ChADMH, the best magnet for continually attracting and preserving the Universal Fire of Nature, in the form of incorporeal spiritual Nitre, for the regeneration of matter.*”

“What on earth does that mean?” asked Sheila, slightly irritated.

“Well, this requires some explanation, and I have made some effort to get to the bottom of this. The term *ChADMH*, is written in Hebrew as...” Here Richard again lifted a little notepaper from his pile on which was written:

הָאָדָמָה

“This word comes up as *Hadamah* more than once in John’s thesis and in his diary. In fact, it is not encountered much in Alchemical treatises, although John states that it is the *Alchemical Fire of Life*. First of all, it is nearly synonymous with, in fact *contains*, the word *Adam*. The word Adam is already quite rich in an etymological sense. As a verb it means *being red* or *being handsome*. As a noun it means *man*, but also *mankind*. It is also the masculine form of the word *adamah* which means *ground* or *earth*. It is also closely associated with the words *adom*, meaning *red*, and *dam*, which is *blood*.”

“I think you are now starting to lecture, Richard,” said Dorothea, “May I remind you it’s getting *late*?”

“I’m sorry, there is indeed still a lot coming up, and the explanations around this *Spiritual Element* may at least interest Michael,” Richard insisted. “So, we can say that Adam implies ‘*the red soil*’ from which we all came into being, as it reads in Genesis that God crafted Adam from the dust of the ground, and breathed *Life* into his nostrils. In other scriptures it reads that Adam was formed of red clay, at least if I slightly interpret the meaning from the Latin term.”

“Is this related to my little theory about the formation of the first molecules of Life? Are you proposing that it wasn’t sand grains but red clay particles?” asked Michael.

“Indeed, Michael, but it seems you have not been keeping up with the latest research in this area, which proposes that clay particles were very likely involved in the formation of the first molecules of life. Already in ancient scriptures there are interesting references to this.”

“Where did you found all that out in such a short time?” Michael asked.

“Well, take for instance the Zohar: in Athanasius Kircher’s Latin translation *Hadamah* appears in one of the fifty gates of understanding, namely the 22<sup>nd</sup> gate entitled: *Limus Terrae Damascenae Materia*, which translates as the *slimy, red, earthly matter*, which I hold to be red clay, but could also refer to the *Clay of Damascus*. Still, the 22<sup>nd</sup> gate of understanding also signifies the appearance of Adam, the First Man, and the creation of conscious life, which is only one of the many steps on the ladder of humankind towards - let’s call it - the Omega Point.”

“From which we are evidently still very, very far removed,” said Dorothea.

“But we *are* approaching it all the same, Thea. Evolution is slow, and the process of globalisation we have seen after the Second World War has at least produced some new cohesion between nations. Maybe it cannot yet



be called *super-hominisation*, but we're clearly moving along that line. As an intermediate note I should mention that Pierre Teilhard de Jardin, your great champion, was not uninterested in the problem of the *metamorphosis of primaval slime*, and he regretted that this step in the process of evolution was likely lost to the palaeontologists in the layers of the Precambrium strata. Still, as a non-physicist and non-chemist, he was one of the first thinkers who realised that matter was *rolled up* or *folded in* upon itself, both in microcosmic and macrocosmic scale. What I want to show here is that the milestones of evolution, such as transformation of dead matter into living matter, is not qualitatively different from the transformation of a human into a super-human, if we mean the latter in a non-discriminatory sense. This is why I concentrated on the term *Hadamah*, which is the real *Key*. Sigismund Bacstrom discusses *Hadamah* in two of his papers, which can also be found here in the University Library. Firstly, in his Rosicrucian Aphorisms, he identifies *Hadamah* as the *Stone or Medicine of the Philosophers*." Richard again lifted a piece of paper from the pile before him and read:

*1. The soul of Man as well as all rational Spirits (the Angels) Hadamah is seen as consisting (according to their primitive Essence) of the Spirit of the World or Anima Mundi and the power of reasoning. They are Unities and most simple, and consequently in their very essence immortal.*

*2. In the Beginning God created the Universal Spirit or the Universal Agent of Nature, the Soul of the Universe. This is the first emanation of Divine Light; it is a unity and immortal, capable of manifesting itself, when moved or agitated, into Light and Fire. It is multipliable and yet is and remains but one. It is Omnipresent and yet occupies no visible space or room, except when manifested or multiplied in its third principle, Fire. It has the power of becoming material and of returning again to universality. This is the subject of the Stone or Medicine of the Philosophers. The more you take this in*

*its simple, universal, unspecified or unmarried state, the easier, simpler and greater is your work, but the more this subject is already specified the more troublesome prolix and expensive is your process.*

*3. Our Magnet to attract it (although every subject in Nature is Magnetical) is Man, and principally Hadamah, the Dust, red earth of Man, which in the months of March, April and May, the Sun in Aries and Taurus is abundantly found in the blood of a healthy man; the Spirit of the Universe during this season residing therein most abundantly, universally and unspecified. Hadamah signifies the first man Adam or Red Earth, which appears when the subject is dried up. In Hadamah lies concealed the blood that precious fluid wherein dwells the Universal Spirit, attracted by inspiration, and the Dust of the Red Earth, left by itself when the Universal fire nature quits it. This Universal Fire is truly Nature.*

“I will stop here - although I should mention that this text gives a rather nice, brief description of the preparation of the *Philosopher's Stone*, and its further multiplication with the use of mercury.”

“The standard, old witchcraft, I gather,” said Dorothea.

“May I have a look at that paper, Richard?” asked Michael. Richard passed the paper on to Michael, who started to read it with singular interest.

“Maybe intriguing for you, Michael, but there is this other small document, or rather a short note, by Bacstrom to which I would like to draw our attention. It is entitled ‘*The Spiritual Sense of Hadamah*’. In it he proposes that, after long deliberation on things communicated to him by the worthy Count, which was likely the Comte de Chazal, he came to understand that the word Hadamah contains an alchemical code. The first syllable is *Ha*, of which Bacstrom writes: *Ha, the Divine aspiration into the nostrils of Adam, when Adam became a living soul; which was an instantaneous emanation or Ray of the Divine Light, proceeding from God Himself, inclosed in the*

*universal Fire of Nature, multipliable into a posterity.* Here we have a hint that the Breath of Life was a form of emanation, which was multipliable in matter.”

“You think it’s DNA... *literally?*” asked Michael.

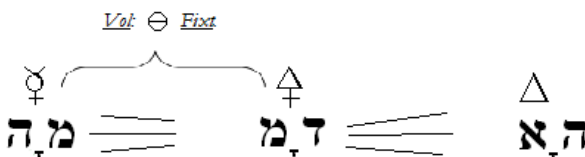
“Or RNA... so we might be lead to think as chemists, with all the cosmological, almost astrological, implications linked to it, as you once explained to me. Still, let me continue my discourse: next we have the syllable: *Dam*, of which Bacstrom writes: *Dam, Blood; This Ray of Divine Light, the Rational immortal soul of Man, enclosed in the universal fire of nature, was communicated to the Blood, and communicated there to Warmth and Circulation.* Here he remarks, as in the aphorisms, that the immortal principle resides principally in the *Arterial Blood*. Finally, of the syllable *Mah* he writes: *Mah, the same aspiration now in the Dam, is resolved into Majim, into Fluidity in general and into Serum or Water especially, in the same manner as the Aspiration of the Breath against a cold Glass is condensed into Water.* As a final remark he writes: *The same Letter Mem, which is the final of Dam, and the initial of Mah, is resolved or condensed into Majim, which denotes that the Majim necessarily belongs to the Dam, as one of its constituting principles, which is Mercurius animalis.*”

“Well, this almost confirms that the breath of life was linked to a *condensation* reaction!” Michael exclaimed.

“I already surmised you might think so,” said Richard.

“I just wonder whether this paper of the aphorisms could actually contain a real recipe for the philosopher’s stone?” asked Michael.

“Undeniably, but I wouldn’t try it. You would need an incredible amount of patience. Interestingly, Bacstrom also gives a nice schematic of Hadamah in alchemistic terms.” Again Richard lifted a sheet of paper from the pile in front of him with a small diagram, and showed it around.



“And what do we read in Zosimus about the first man?” Richard continued, fishing yet another paper scrap from the little pile in front of him. “He says as follows: *The Chaldeans and Parthians and Medes and Hebrews call Him Adam, which is by interpretation virgin Earth, and blood-red Earth, and fiery Earth, and fleshly Earth.* On basis of this I think I have found a more precise explanation of Hadamah, which may interest you all.”

“I believe,” said Dorothea in a menacing, low voice, “that we are not here to save the world, neither to engage in witchcraft, and I’m certainly not going to listen to explanations of Rosicrucian documents that were not intended for us outsiders to be read and, even worse, *interpreted*; this is not at all fitting practice for a Christian.” She loudly placed her glass of port on the table, and looked highly troubled. All were slightly taken aback by Dorothea’s sudden utterance. “So much for the enlightened views of Teilhard de Jardin,” she sighed, “but the fact remains that we are still far away from his *Omega Point* and have a long road to go. It’s all to this secret knowledge to which I protest. If there is such knowledge, which I doubt, it is not intended for us. Ordinary people should keep far from occult matters. Even the Rosicrucian adepts refrained from direct action, as you just explained.” Then she lifted a warning finger: “Except, of course, when you think you are so extraordinary!”

“It is more the extraordinary *situation* we’re in, rather than us *being* so extraordinary,” said Richard.

“What situation do you mean? You’re in trouble again?” asked Dorothea.

“No, no, we are *all* in it,” said Sheila, “It’s something we have discovered.”

“And what may that be?” asked Dorothea impatiently tapping on the table.

“We are not quite sure exactly what it is, but for all we know it could be even the Holy Grail,” said Richard. “It has been kept by the Tilloch family for ages on the Isle of Madeira. In fact, it has been buried in the cellar of

Maria's house for nearly three centuries, before it was discovered by Michael in the infamous year 2005."

"You mean this sarcophagus you were talking about earlier?"

"Yes, among many other items. The only thing is, Thea," explained Richard, "that we don't quite know what to do with it all. Now, I think our quest will lead us to Damascus."

Dorothea looked down at her glass of port, and stated with great determination: "I'm afraid that in this quest, if it's becoming one, I will *not* partake!" She was looking grimly at her glass of port. "It's too dangerous anyway, with this terrible civil war endlessly raging in Syria, and the UN not being of *any* help."

"I understand, Thea, but I have made a promise, not only to Sheila, but also to myself," said Richard.

Dorothea emptied her glass and said: "I suppose that means I will go home." After putting down the empty glass on the table, she rose from her seat, and said: "Wishing you all a goodnight, and I hope you won't detain Dicky too long! It *is* getting late, you know!" Then she walked out of the evening room.

### 3

All were looking a bit frustrated, not knowing what to say, and the falling silence could be cut with a knife.

"Well... I dare say! Is she perhaps a Methodist?" asked Maria.

"No, just a frank Christian who understands her limits," said Richard.

"Of course she makes a point here. We are not at all so happy with the secrets we are supposed to keep safe, and we are still very far from proper understanding," said Sheila.

"Maybe, yes, but maybe it is convenient Thea left. I can explain things to her later, in a more quiet moment. She will turn 'round, I'm sure. So, let's return to my discourse, because this is still going to take a little time, I'm afraid," Richard urged. "The term, *Hadamah*, as it alludes to the 22<sup>nd</sup>

gate of understanding, points to one of the steps of evolution, maybe pointing to the striving of the individual to become an adept, or to rise above the lower material existence onto the higher planes of being. We have all read that, if it is true what he has written in his diary, John Armstrong had become an adept of a secret Rosicrucian order.”

“I don’t see the sense of all this secrecy in this time,” said Sheila. “Through the theosophical movement most Rosicrucian ideas were made public one way or the other, as we can see here again in these documents.”

“Of course striving to the higher planes of being has its dangers. This has been stressed by many philosophers, and Carl Jung frequently discussed the dangers of probing the collective unconscious. Anyway, the alchemical decree that ‘*its power is perfected if it has been turned into earth*’ gets a strange dimension here: we are in all likelihood referring literally to how life came about on this planet by the means of *Hadamah*, which is *Mercurius animalis* revived, the animation of the body and the materialisation of the soul. Thus, *Hadamah* points to a vitalising force that was painstakingly kept secret by the Gnostics, the Hermeticists, Alchemists, Rosicrucians, but it was not revealed by the theosophists either, because they too had their inner, secret circles.”

“You keep us in utter suspense, Richard,” said Sheila. “Please come to the point!”

“Sure! I believe I solved the riddle, unfortunately, with the help of certain things I’ve found out just the other day.”

“Please, Richard, carry on before I explode; it’s getting *late*,” said Sheila.

At that moment one of the waiters came in, and asked: “Is there still something you require, Sir?”

“Please, a few more brandies and port, and also the bill please,” Richard instructed. The waiter bowed, and then left the room, closing the door silently behind him.

“Maria, this golden cross you have kept in Funchal, I heard it is rather large and precious, is that so?” said Richard.

"Its present value can hardly be estimated," Maria commented. "Don't feel much for bringing it back to Syria under the ruling conditions."

"It has a red rose of rubies in the centre, hasn't it?" asked Richard.

"Yes, indeed," Maria replied.

"What is the Rose... in symbolical terms?" asked Richard.

"Stands for the Virgin Mary, Isis... Aphrodite," Sheila recited.

"So there we have our first component: *Mercurius vegetalis*, also symbolised by this nice rose tree in your garden. What do the five petals of the rose symbolise?"

"The wounds of the suffering of Christ," Sheila dutifully answered.

"True! There is also another use for the Rose," said Richard, "as *sub-Rosa*, *under* the Rose."

"Secret knowledge," Sheila stated.

"Correct again, Sheila." Richard straightened his back, and at that moment the waiter came in again, with a tray full of new glasses of spirits and a formidable bill. "Thank you!" said Richard, handing over a credit card. "We are just getting to the culmination point of our evening!"

"Quite so, sir. We are soon closing, by the way."

"Ah, thank you. Yes, we will soon leave, but give us a moment still, I pray," said Richard.

"That's OK, sir, no worry: You can all leave after closing time through the back door, if it isn't inconvenient."

"That's fine with us, Timothy!" said Richard.

The waiter again quietly left the room.

"As if you have arranged this all beforehand," said Maria.

"Not really, no... Now, we can thus safely conclude that the immaculate birth and sacrifice of the Deity, and the demand of secrecy are thus symbolised in the Rose?" Everybody nodded. Richard was clearly building an undisputable case, but everybody was still wondering about the final verdict. "I have already communicated earlier that the golden cross, known as the *Cross of Sharon*, was stolen in 1720, together with a few other

treasures, by the Tillochs, and in a time that the Rosicrucians were still *in*, so to speak, although in the time of Alexander Tilloch they were already in decline, and the theosophists were on the rise. Furthermore, I have also been hunting treasures in Syria, during which we came in possession of the two axes but also a rather extraordinary *sistrum*, from the ruins of an ancient temple.”

“As tourist archaeologists on the escape,” Sheila snorted.

“Indeed, but I dare say these Tillochs hunted treasures throughout the Middle East and Europe for a good reason.”

“Which is?” asked Sheila.

“I would like to return your mind to the *Order of the Purple Rose*... What were they trying to achieve?” asked Richard.

“They tried to reconstruct the *Garden of Eden*, if I understood correctly,” said Pierce.

“Exactly! And you’ve all seen the fully grown *Tree of Life* in Maria’s garden and all the precious treasures in the cellar. Many strange objects were collected there, but they are silent in all languages, and their purpose has remained a riddle,” said Richard.

“Indeed. So, what were the Tillochs aiming at?” Pierce queried, in his turn impatiently tapping on the table.

“Reconstruction of the Divine Oracle,” Richard proudly stated.

Twelve eyes were staring at Richard in full disbelief.

“You mean the Oracle of *Delphi*?” asked Marco.

“Yes,” said Richard. “Wouldn’t you agree that the present state of our world cries out for an oracle like that of Delphi? Aren’t we in dire need of divine prophesies and justice? Have you heard of these plans of the Greeks to restore the temple site at Delphi?”

“Ioannis Diamantopolis, wasn’t it?” asked Pierce.

“Yes, he leads the project.”

“But that’s a *tourist* stunt,” said Marco. “Hardly to be taken serious.”



“The idea of the Greeks is not really so inapt. Maybe there is more going on,” said Richard.

“Well, I dare say, the old kings and philosophers were eager to use the shrine at Delphi, so indeed it would not be a bad idea to reconstruct it, but can this be done... I mean, done *in practice*?” Sheila asked.

A grin appeared on Pierce’s face and he said: “Surely, the main bottleneck will be to find a person suitable for the position of the *Pythia*.”

“Indeed, and to find somebody to interpret her ambiguous statements, brought on by ecstasy,” Sheila added.

“I think it was ethylene gas, Sheila,” Richard commented, “but for the rest you raise a serious concern.”

“But how do you know this, Richard,” Sheila stammered.

Richard lifted the little booklet from the table, and waved it around. “A secret code I found in John’s thesis.”

“Ah, I see. Now, at last, we’re *getting* somewhere!” said Michael.

“Indeed! I will first tell you *how* I found it: namely, by putting together three things: Firstly, Phillip Chance with his strange uttering that it was ‘*such a shame that Apollo was still robbed of his laurel leaves*’. This he said after reading John’s thesis, but it really reads nowhere in the book, and it is a bit strange he might have had that opinion himself, unless he agreed for some particular reason with the last oracle given by the Pythia. Secondly, the predominance of the number seven in John’s thesis: the word seven appears on every page, and there are seven chapters. I must remind you that this points to *coding* and *prophecy*, as the number seven also appears frequently in the Revelation of John. And think again: the Revelation of *John*. These facts I combined first, and I was almost sure this thesis was hiding some sort of code. It was only when I identified some of the peculiarities of the text that I found the key, the third factor. Take for instance, this passage. He opened the book at a marked page and read: ‘*Men have trod the Road to Damascus and found enlightenment, but the divine spirit can be found in the simple formulation of the term modifying the quantum potential,*

*which appears as higher-dimensional variables in the second derivative of the wave function...*' and so on. It is a bit as if the Road to Damascus has been dragged into it by force, wouldn't you say?"

Six heads were affirmatively nodding in his direction. "I'd like to find enlightenment on the road to Damascus rather than in a wave function," said Pierce. Muffled laughter was heard around the table.

"Be careful Pierce, you will find yourself on that road sooner than you would dare," said Richard, and then he proceeded with his lengthy discourse: "Another example, one in which John refers to Apollo, is also queer: '*If Orpheus is the secret doctrine (Apollo) revealed through music (Calliope), as proposed by our famous American philosopher, we may augment his statement by proposing that the Mind is revealed through String Theory in the same way: the strings on the Bow of Apollo refer to the dimensions of the Material-Mental-Spiritual world, and besides having a tune they also have impulse. Hence, the use of the Bow both as a musical instrument and as a weapon represents the procreative power of Mental Vibrations and Harmony, as already understood by the Pythagoreans.*' Wouldn't you say that Apollo with his bow is also somewhat dragged into the subject, when it is all about Orpheus and Pythagoras and vibrations in this chapter?"

All heads were nodding affirmatively in Richard's direction.

"Then, this strange passage near the end of the book: '*As with all the primeval serpents, Echidna was capable of twisting in various knots, and as she took the shape of the ellipsis, and biting her own tail, she was said to be most powerful. From here the sign of infinity was derived. Still we forget here that the serpent was a symbol of fertility and secret knowledge. It is not surprising that when the myths deal with serpents we are actually discussing the generative powers of the elemental strings, which are called hyper-meta-proto elemental matter in Besant's treatise on Occult Chemistry...*' Now, why does he suddenly mention Echidna, of whom he has not spoken earlier? And why does *she* suddenly embody the sign of infinity, while this cannot be found *anywhere* in the Myths? All those loose enigmatic sentences appear at the beginning of each page, and when you pick the *seventh* word

of each page, you can piece together the following communication...”  
Richard again raised a sheet from his great pile of enigmatic papers, and recited:

*Inexorable are the Ways of the Divine Initiator!  
Apollo with his Lyre and Bow,  
vouchsafed to unveil His unbending Will,  
has remained in hiding low.*

*When Midas on his Throne will reign,  
and Gyges commits his infamy anew,  
the True Adept will set out and leave  
the lofty gate to Damascus askew.*

*Search for Him not among the Rich,  
for He resides with the Poorest of the Poor.  
Still He does not waver before the wealthy King  
to reclaim his Throne for a nobler tour.*

*Look not for the Bowls among the Well-to-do,  
but rather at the unclean Sophist's sty,  
where in His hunger for facts and truth,  
He leaves no question without reply.*

*From the Holy Garden of the Hesperides  
thitherto bring the Tripod back,  
the Pigeons and the Silver Ibis fair,  
with all the offerings that lack.*

*From the resurrected Tree of Life,  
Echidna keeps the fruit in check.  
The Sistrum holds Pytho back,  
reformed as the Tripod's neck.*

There was a deadly silence around the table. “Can you read that again please?” asked Sheila. Richard passed the paper on to Sheila. She started to read it, with Pierce glancing at it from the side.

“What on earth does this all mean?” Pierce asked.

Timothy, the waiter, came in again, and was fishing for Richard’s signature. When he took the remittance back and returned to Richard his credit card, he said: “It has been rather a mess in town; please take care on the way home.”

“That’s OK Timothy, I live nearby and even protestors need sleep.”

“Well, things haven’t quite settled yet,” said the waiter.

“OK. We are just finishing up.” said Richard. When the waiter had left, Richard carried on untiringly: “You see, it is all a bit of a puzzle still, but most of the pieces have fallen into place already. At least this message clearly proves my theory that the sanctuary in Funchal was designed as a means to reconstruct the ancient Oracle of Delphi, by collecting all the artefacts that were used inside it. All the key instruments of the oracle are there, except the *Neck of the Tripod*, the *Throne of Midas* and the *Bowls of Gyges*.”

“Do you mean we have to retrieve them in some way?” asked Sheila.

“I think we are called on to do so. We’ll have to watch the news from Syria. If peace comes about, we should at least go there and return the Cross of Sharon, and try to get some more hints regarding the missing artefacts, likely with the help of this emerging adept.”

“But how could dad have known all this back in 1992?” Sheila wondered.

“I think the Order of the Purple Rose was abiding time,” Richard said.

“I don’t understand what Delphi has to do with the shrine at Damascus and even less with the temple of Cybele,” said Sheila.

“Remember that prophesy is much more ancient than the period of classical Greece. The temple of Cybele was an earlier institution of the Delphic oracle, and it employed the same crucial artefacts for prophesy. At

least the throne of Cybele is among those. Pictures and statues of Cybele can be found going back as far as 6000 BC, where the Goddess is seated on a throne flanked by panthers or lions. Interestingly, an impressive statue of Cybele can be found in the abbey of the Rose Cross in Damascus. I've seen it with my own eyes..." Richard lifted a paper again from his endless pile, and showed it around.



He then went on explaining: "This is from Montfaucon's authoritative books on ancient history, and the original engraving was made by Pirro Ligorio. This statue is truly located in Damascus, and it reads: *MATER DEOR, MATER SYRLAE*. This is the *Key* to the whole mystery."

The picture was passed around the table. When it reached Michael, he asked: "Are these then the instruments for divine prophesy and instruction?"

“Maybe. Montfaucon writes about Cybele as follows: *Placed on her head is an Episcopal mitre, adorned on the lower part with towers and pinnacles. Over the gate of the city is a crescent, and beneath the circuit of the walls a crown of rays. The Goddess wears a kind of surplice, much like the surplice of a priest or bishop, and upon the surplice a tunic, falling down to the legs; and overall an Episcopal cope, with the twelve signs of the Zodiac wrought on the borders. The figure hath a lion on each side, and holds in its left hand a Tympanum, a Sistrum, a Distaff, a Caduceus, and another instrument. In her right hand she holds with her middle finger a thunderbolt, and upon the same arm animals, insects, and, as we may guess, flowers and fruit, a bow, a quiver, a torch, and a scythe.* Thus, we can find here the sistrum, which fills a similar function as the *Hadamah*, to revive nature from stagnation. This sistrum we have in our possession. But regarding the throne on which Cybele is seated, there is the important fact that the throne of Midas was wrought after the model of the throne of Cybele. It is also known that the legendary King Midas donated his throne to Delphi.”

“What was the throne used for in Delphi?” asked Michael. “I thought the Pythia sat on a tripod.”

“At Delphi it was the interpreter who sat on the throne,” Richard explained. “There were also at the entrance the five bowls of Gyges, which were used for votive offerings.”

“And this throne, the bowls and the neck of the tripod, we all have to retrieve somehow? Is that what you propose?” asked Sheila.

“Yes, but I haven’t the faintest idea where they are now. As much is clear that the sistrum plays a role in retrieving the neck of the Tripod, which was, by legend, a statue of Pytho,” said Richard.

“And you think the time is getting ripe for the Oracle of Delphi to be re-installed? Is that what you say?” asked Maria.

“Yes, high time Apollo gets his laurel leaves back,” said Richard. “There are still a few unknown factors: one is the interpreter, who is probably the Adept from Damascus, who somehow disjoins, or leaves

open the gate, but the most important missing factor, as Pierce already indicated, is the Pythia. John's text doesn't mention a word about her."

"How very, very strange," mumbled Maria.

"I don't understand how Mnemosyne and Abraxynne fit into all this," asked Pierce.

"Mnemosyne was placed in the temple in Delphi, so it reads in Democritus fifth Scroll," said Richard. "Maybe we should surmise that Mnemosyne was the Earth Mother known in many cultures by different names, but needed for the prophesies. Votive offerings were by tradition always made to the Earth Mother, such as to Cybele, even human sacrifices. Abraxynne was her adversary; it appears as if it is Pytho, but I think..."

Richard couldn't quite finish his last sentence, because a loud crash was heard in the restaurant. There were harsh voices and yelling, and then a terrible sound of breaking glass, as if something had been thrown through the front window of the restaurant. They all saw the door being thrust open by the two waiters, who ran inside with all the coats of the guests in their arms. Through the open door a fire could be seen, which was extinguished by a third person. "You'd better all leave through the back door," Timothy said, in an incongruently calm voice. "It might get a bit warm here, because they threw a Molotov cocktail through our front window. However, we'd seen it coming already for some time, so we were well-prepared..."

"Let's hope so," said Richard, stowing all his papers back inside his pockets.

"We hope everything was to satisfaction?" Timothy asked.

"Absolutely," said Richard. "We'll certainly be back sometime."

Timothy helped the ladies with getting their coats on, and then returned to the restaurant side, snatching another fire extinguisher from the wall of the evening room.

“Come on Marco, we must be going to our hotel; still quite a walk. It’s getting too warm here,” said Maria, who quickly donned her heavy fur coat. Marco quickly rose, as demanded. Maria and Marco were the first to dash out of the door at the end of a small corridor, and then the rest of the company, also having put on their coats in a great hurry, moved towards the emergency exit.

Having proceeded to the inner court, Pierce said: “Thank you, Richard, for the enlightening evening and the great dinner. I dare say it was getting high time we all got moving. It was already so late, and there were enough mysteries for us tonight. We are quite finished.”

Luckily, they were the only guests remaining that evening, and they could all make their safe escape out of the distinguished establishment, which was presently torn apart by hooligans, who didn’t care about a good meal or sleep, and even less about history.

“Almost makes me think of that weird dream I had all those years ago,” said Michael, walking besides Pierce. “Do you remember? The Tsarist cavalry driving the populace down the streets of Moscow?”

“Oh, yes, yes,” said Pierce. “Let us hope the events here are less dangerous!”

They had all walked through an iron gate out of the inner square, and rounded a few corners, Richard in front with Sheila at his side, and the rest following silently. Shouting was heard at some distance, but the uproar didn’t seem to drift in their direction.

“Pity that the evening has come to such a dramatic conclusion, but I still hope you are all well fed, and will contemplate on our coming quest,” said Richard.

Sheila said: “Thank you, Richard. You fulfilled your commission superbly, although I have to say that your exposition was rather long-winded!”

“Sorry, Sheila,” Richard replied. “It’s only because I have the feeling we are still groping in the dark in some matters.”



They had passed through some gardens behind the block of houses onto Cowan Lane and from there walked up to Glasgow Street. They then turned left and came at the crossing of Bank Street, and looking back they discerned - at a safe distance - a raging crowd in front of *The Provost*.

"Where is all this going, I wonder," said Michael. "Are we yet on the brink of a revolution? The last five years have been almost like a nightmare."

"Better not think of it," said Maria, who had taken his arm. "There are signs for the better too." Maria and Marco then said goodbye to the rest, further walking along Glasgow Street, while all the others accompanied Richard in northern direction towards Great Western Road, where they said goodbye to Pierce and Gillian who were staying at the Clifton hotel. Sheila and Michael then walked with Richard to Belmont Street. Arriving soon at Belmont Crescent, a nice little park came in sight.

"It seems Thea has kept the lights on," Richard said, glancing upwards to the circular block of flats on the other side of the road. "I have to say goodbye for now, but I'm sure we'll see each other again soon!"

"Wishing you both well, Richard, and thanks again," said Michael. "I'd rather keep this paper of Sigismund Bacstrom for a while. Is that OK?"

"Sure, it's a copy," said Richard, "Keep it." Richard blinked his eye, and he knew what Michael was going to do with it.

Sheila shook her head disapprovingly. "Once a chemist, *always* a chemist," she sighed.

They both watched Richard crossing the street and safely entering his new home. Then Sheila and Michael walked further along the road back into the city, which had finally calmed down. They didn't yet realise that the city centre was badly ruined, and a dark and cold Christmas was coming to Glasgow.

## 4.

# A Strange Disappearance

☞ *Dissolutio* ☞

*Now come, and next hereafter apprehend what sorts, how vastly different in form, how varied in multitudinous shapes they are - these old beginnings of the universe. Not in the sense that only few are furnished with one like form, but rather not at all in general have they likeness each with each, no marvel: since the stock of them is so great that there's no end (as I have taught) nor sum, they must indeed not one and all be marked by equal outline and by shape the same.*

*Titus Lucretius Carus  
On the Nature of Things*

### 1



old and stormy was the Wednesday evening in mid February 2016 when the clientele at *The Prancing Pony* had been rather sparse, and Michael had a quiet evening. Now that Gillian had been off to Russia, and Sheila was with her relatives in Madeira, Pierce had kept his early promise to act as a stand-in at the farm. Rather tired from a day of toil, first milking the cows, then seeing to the pigs, collecting the eggs from the sizable hen house, checking and repairing the dairy machinery, and finally ploughing a new plot of land with the new, comfy tractor, he was intending to have a beer and a nice meal in the old cellar and after that tug himself in at about ten o'clock. However, Michael had not left him off the hook, giving him some new instructions for the next day. The last issue on the agenda was made clear to him: the vet would have to come over to have a look at Sheena, the old mare. She was already retired for many years, and had developed a severe osteoporosis. Maybe she would need to be brought out of her misery. Michael rather wished he

could leave it all to Pierce, who was less attached to the old love of Michael and Sheila.

“I say to you, Michael,” said Pierce, hanging over the bar desk, “the vet will need your presence and approval anyway, because he doesn’t know me at all.”

“Maybe, but for now I’d rather not think of the matter,” said Michael who was cleaning up some glasswork.

“Sheena is really fine to my opinion. At least she doesn’t really suffer, if she can be put on a suitable calcium diet,” said Pierce. “For a horse not being anymore in active service it shouldn’t matter so much.”

“With this weather she’s suffering, I know,” said Michael, stopping for a while with his dishes and beaming at the ceiling. “I’ve always been very sensitive with animals and Sheila even more.”

“I agree, in principle, but she looked rather active and lively today. So, it’s better to put Sheena down while Sheila is away, is that it?”

“She will scold me, but I think that our uncle Herriot should see her, and give his fair opinion. I think he may be a bit scornful, because we have been putting it off far too long. Of course I will have to come and see her too, if you fancy it.”

“I certainly would fancy it. I’m just an outsider. What will the vet think?”

“Hmm, I see your point, but...” At that moment, a customer entered and Michael’s expression cleared up. “Hullo, hullo! Who do we have here?”

Pierce turned round on his bar seat, and looked at the entrance. An elder man entered, faintly familiar, but he couldn’t be sure.

“Howdy! Michael!” the man said cheerfully.

“Well, Peter, ages since I’ve seen you. All’s well?” Michael stepped from behind the counter to shake his hand.

“Better than ever!”

“Pierce! Meet my former boss: Peter Hartford. Peter, this is my friend Pierce.”

“Ah, yes, I remember having heard about you,” said Peter. Pierce rose from his seat and shook his hands politely.

“Coming to taste our new ales, Peter?” Michael prodded.

“Indeed, Mister Butterbur!”

“Is there a special reason?”

“Today, my old and valued colleague, you see before you a *pensioner*!” Peter said with a theatrical bow.

“Ah! You left Inventura, at last?”

“Yesterday! I had always in mind to come and visit your cellar at this occasion.”

“Well, that’s quite an honour indeed, and a great occasion for a chat. Please take a seat and look at the menu, while I first do my round.” Michael walked off to one corner, where good old Charles was still awaiting his new ale, and then he approached the other customers and asked if something had remained on their wish list. Coming back, he attended to the new orders, while Pierce and Peter started conversation.

“Do not quite remember ever having met you,” said Pierce.

“I don’t think so, but Michael has told me a few things about you. You are the chemist who turned musician, aren’t you?”

“No, no, not really.”

“Oh... but didn’t you live on compensation money from Dow Corning?”

“Correct, but only partly.”

“And the guy that got various inheritances from his aunts?”

“True! Hope Michael hasn’t told too much about me.”

“I don’t think he told anything in detail, so I will stop bothering you. Michael’s inn is doing well, I’ve heard. He had quite a change of profession. I was a bit surprised, when he pushed it through in the end.”

“It was not a difficult decision,” said Pierce.

“Well, I suppose it was all backed up by his dazzling wife,” said Peter with a slightly dim voice.

“Do I sense a spark of envy there?” asked Pierce.

“No, no, but it must be said that she always stole the evening when there was a Christmas party at Inventura... even arm-wrestling with some of the men in the end.”

“Did she now?” said Michael, returning behind the counter. “I do not remember such an occasion. What may I serve you, Peter?”

“I’ll have a pint of your pale ale, and one of those famous pies, Michael.”

“OK. I’ll go and get the pie in the oven,” said Michael, who instantly disappeared into the miniature kitchen in an annex behind the bar.

“But was it not so that you inherited a whole estate from one of your aunts?” Peter inquired.

“Yes. Manor’s Green, from my Aunt Guinevere, or aunt Ginny, as they all called her.”

“Oh, and where is that?”

“Near to Worcester... on the countryside.”

“Ah, so far away? Hmm... and I also heard you inherited a very precious piano from another aunt.”

“Yes, a Duo-Art piano from my aunt Julia, but that was years earlier. I had just started my first job then, at Dow.”

“Hmm... Why were your aunts so fond of you, if I may ask?”

“I don’t know. I was their only nephew, and I always faithfully attended their *soirees*, which they organised in turn in Portsmouth and in Worcester. Then I was still in my teens. Actually, they were very anxious to turn me into an actor, as they were both mad with the theatre, but I resisted firmly, and said I would become a chemist.”

“Hmm. Why chemistry?”

“Don’t you know? Aren’t you a chemist yourself?”

“Yes, but how do you know already as a teenager you have something with chemistry?”

“A desire to probe the miracle of life I guess, but in the beginning it had more to do with the physiognomy of fireworks.”

“Ah, in that way,” said Peter, “Well, if we consider the recent new findings around primeval mater, the combination of the miracle of life with fireworks doesn’t seem to be so inappropriate.”

“Now you are talking riddles,” said Pierce.

“I mean to say that everything was born of Fire, as Heraclitus already proposed *ages* ago.”

“Ah, I see,” said Pierce. He didn’t see it at all, but he was too tired to care and ask for additional explanations.

After a little pause in their conversation, Michael stepped out of the kitchenette, and poured a beer from the tap. “Here is your pale ale, Peter. Hope you aren’t grilling my friend here.”

“That’s OK, Michael,” said Pierce.

“Is Sheila not around?” asked Peter.

“No, no, she’s on holiday to Madeira, visiting her sister.”

“Ah... pity... Wasn’t Maria her *niece*?” said Peter.

“We’re pretty sure they must be sisters, because they are so very alike, you know, Maria and Sheila.”

“Ah, in what kind of things?” Peter asked.

“Both good in music, both like reading English literature – even sharing the same favourite writers – interest in physical exercise, appreciating country-life, gosh, you name it.”

“Physical exercise? You mean Maria also does arm-wrestling?” asked Peter.

“Believe me or not, but the first time I met Maria *tête-à-tête*, or was it the second time, she actually invited me to a match of arm-wrestling.”

“Oh? How extraordinary!” said Pierce. “You didn’t mention *that* before.”

“I wilfully forgot to mention it, because I *lost*!”

Both men roared with laughter, and Pierce said: “OK. Now I understand... Pianists of her calibre have strong arms, I gather.”

“Indeed... but all the same it was one of the many striking things I observed when I first met Maria, and my notions appeared, in the end, to be quite well grounded, weren’t they?”

“True! This is interesting! So, what writers do they both fancy?” asked Peter.

“Largely *the two Georges*: George Sand and George Eliot.”

“And both seem to be able musicians too,” Peter mumbled.

“Pretty good, yes.”

“Some people are, evidently, overly bestowed with talent, intelligence, and beauty. I find it a bit frightening,” said Peter.

“I too!” said Pierce.

“They share another hobby: the occult,” said Michael.

“Ah, yes, concerning that,” said Peter, “I had some hopes of seeing Sheila. There is something I would like to discuss.”

“Really? What might that be?” asked Michael.

“Strange dreams, not really nightmares, but they puzzle me,” said Peter.

“Oh, well... Sheila will come back from Madeira on Saturday, so come and see us again next weekend,” said Michael invitingly. “I’ll get your pie from the oven now.”

“Fine!” said Peter.

The rest of the clientele had left, and when Michael returned with Peter’s pie, he issued a warning: “Careful, it’s quite hot inside, thanks to the microwave.”

“Smells good!” Peter praised. “What’s in it?”

“Minced meat, onion, leek, mushrooms, and some secret herbs.”

“Nice, nice... a pie with secrets,” said Peter. “Just as I would expect in the *Prancing Pony*!”

“Quite so! What, if I may ask, have you been doing on your last working day, Peter?” Michael asked.

“Cleaning up... and it was a long day, I can tell you.”

“Have you thrown away all the papers?”

“Oh, yes, much went into the garbage bins, but there are a few books which, I think, you would like to preserve. Some of those you were in as an author and editor.”

“OK, I think I might have copies of them myself, but I can have a look at them, I suppose. Of course they are already a bit out-dated, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’m afraid so, yes,” Peter nodded.

“OK. Better throw them away then. What about the others at Inventura? I suppose there is not much of the old gang around anymore.”

“Dage left the firm seven years ago. Eric and his wife suddenly left for Syria at about the same time, and I’ve not heard from them ever since.”

“*Syria*, of all places!” Michael exclaimed. “What for?!”

“They were there on holiday and found this nice place, a hotel-restaurant and conference resort of some sort, somewhere on the road from Beirut to Damascus. Sylvia has family there, you see, so they decided to buy the place and they left... well... almost in a wink of an eye. Of course in that time there was this new wave of democracy in the air with the *Damascus Declaration*. I had an unpleasant surprise with it anyway, such an experienced colleague suddenly leaving... Didn’t they write to you?”

“No, I’ve not got any word,” said Michael. “Better pray they’re still alive, after all this turmoil.”

“I suppose after all these years of civil war they could have run into trouble, but there is now a small light: the UN is finally sending in peacekeepers, one year after the resolution,” said Peter.

“Yes, I’ve read about the METFOR.”

“Sounds rather like a metaphor to me,” said Pierce, “but I suppose it’s better than nothing.”



“Well, let’s hope things will be better in summer,” said Michael, but then he reverted to the earlier subject. “So, you were cleaning up your office?”

“Yes. The most terrible thing was the storage room for chemical waste,” said Peter.

“You had to clean that up too?”

“I had promised it to my successor Jim Osborne, you remember him?”

“Yes, sure, we have had lunch together many times.”

“Well, the storage room is a terrible mess, I can say that, and we’ve not even got started properly with the clean-up. I should have started it a week earlier.”

“So, what’s wrong?”

“There was a strange problem with the shelves and the room itself. Everything is rather badly deteriorated. For instance, those shelves were not only rusty, but there were these weird holes in them, as if eaten through by some sort of woodworm,” Peter explained.

“*Woodworm*!?” Michael repeated.

“Maybe more fitting to call it *metal-worm*, but there’s not really any other way to describe it.”

Michael started feeling a bit uneasy, and inquired further: “So there are *holes* in the shelves?”

“Yeah, and lots of them... and all of the same size,” said Peter.

“Hmm... and have you found the cause?”

“No. We should investigate it with a specialist still. Somebody said that it might have been caused by a bottle of mercury that must have toppled, and small droplets might have eaten through the iron of the shelves.”

“Blimey!” Pierce uttered. “Mercury is dangerous stuff, difficult to clean up too, if it has spread through the whole room.”

“Yes, but we actually couldn’t find a trace of mercury, and the jar with mercury waste is still quite intact. Strangely, as the holes in the shelves were all exactly of the same size, it was more as if somebody had been

going around with a drill. In fact, there were also similar holes in the concrete floor. That can't be mercury, can it?"

"No, no. That is quite remarkable," said Michael broodingly, "and some people are coming to examine it?"

"Yes, they are coming on Friday; a specialist team from CWTT. Truly, there is a terrible smell, and I never stayed long in the place."

"So, there is an odd smell, and then holes of the same size. Hmm... hmm..." Michael murmured. He was already feverishly pondering on the problem. "And all the waste is still there?"

"Yes, nobody is allowed to touch anything."

"Is there still *radioactive* waste?"

"I went in quickly with the Geiger counter, but hardly got any signal. I think all those iodine tubes are quite extinguished. Radioactivity doesn't seem to be the problem."

"Hmm... I think I'll come and have a look too on Friday, if you don't mind."

Peter suddenly showed a suspicious glance, and said: "Have you been dumping some dangerous stuff in our waste depot, Michael?"

"I unfortunately have to confess, Peter."

"What is it?"

"A radioactive sample... at least so it appeared to me at the time."

"An apparently radioactive sample, and you think that it might possibly behave like a *woodworm*?"

"Some sort of worm it was, indeed. I cast it in lead, a week before I left Inventura."

"Why did you do such an elaborate thing... casting it in lead?"

"It should not see the light of day," Michael mumbled mysteriously.

"What on earth for?" Peter stammered with a gaze of disbelief.

"Well, I put it among Dage's stuff in the hope it would one day be processed together with all the other radioactive waste, but I fear I might have underestimated the enemy."

“*Enemy!*? What the hell are you saying?”

“Well, I’d rather come and have a look on Friday morning too, and let us leave the matter till then.”

Peter looked grim, shook his head, and said: “Well, I suppose I’ll have to be patient then. Come on Michael, give me another ale! My mouth suddenly fell dry!”

The evening remained tranquil, no other clients had entered, and various things were discussed of the good old days at Inventura. But then, when Peter had finished another pie and gulped down his third ale, he abruptly left. It was half past twelve, and Pierce remarked: “Well! Peter brought tidings as strange as news from *Bree!*”

“Indeed!” Michael laughed.

“Would the little bugger have escaped?” Pierce asked.

“Let’s hope not. At the time I thought that the leaden casing should be sufficient to keep it secure, but now I am less certain,” said Michael.

“Would it have been *primeval matter*, I wonder,” Pierce mumbled softly.

“What do you mean?”

“Something Peter just mentioned. It reminded me of our strange finding a few years back concerning the *hyper-meta-proto-elemental matter*, which was mentioned in John’s thesis. Do you remember?”

“Ah, yes. Was it not from that booklet called *Occult Chemistry*, and the microstructure of the atoms?” Michael asked.

“Yes, yes. The thing is, I wonder if Peter might have studied more on the subject.”

“Likely has. Always has been very interested in subatomic structure.”

“Hmm... Primeval matter could be quite fiery, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Do you think this would explain the woodworm? Well, there’s a thought,” said Michael. “I have now read these papers of Sigismund Backstrom Richard gave me. Just got the impression there might be something about matter we have overlooked.”

“Such as what?” asked Pierce.

“I have come to the conclusion that life could manifest itself on a chemically much lower level, and that the recipe for the famous *Stone of the Philosophers* could actually be quite real.”

“After all Richard has conveyed to us in Glasgow, I have rather the impression it could all be a huge hoax.”

“Well... it resembles a bit the age-old hoax of cold fusion, but I am investigating the matter all the same. Who knows, maybe we’ll stumble on the truth of the matter.”

“Is that test with the horse dung already coming to an end? Sheena’s stable is now full of pails of her droppings, all with thermometers in it. How would *you* feel?”

Michael laughed heartily, and said: “Sure! I see what you mean, and for a horse Sheena is quite intelligent. In the morning she looked at me as if she was thinking: ‘*Here we have that goofy researcher again*’. Luckily, I’ve got some idea how to do it now. The temperature of horse dung is really uncannily stable: 45.6 degrees plus or minus a half degree. That is a precious piece of knowledge for me. I still need a bit better heat isolation, and some basic chemicals, by the way.”

At that point Pierce decided to change the subject, because something had remained nagging at him. “What have you been all telling Peter about me?”

“Not really anything in detail, Pierce,” said Michael who had finished cleaning the beer glasses and took a seat.

“He was quite inquisitive! I hope you didn’t mention anything about my lengthy and unhappy periods of unemployment and the SAD.”

“No, no, Pierce, I may have mentioned a few minor things about you in connection with the Dow case and your inheritances, but really nothing particularly private, and certainly not anything about the separation anxiety disorder. I’ve always been aware that Peter is rather inquisitive and has an infallible memory. That’s his problem.”

“How so?”

“It has brought him difficulties many times, particularly with his wife.”

“Forgetting things would be a blessing, if it were the things you would *like* to forget. Unfortunately, all those nadirs of the past remain in your memory, while the more pleasant things of life are almost too easily forgotten.”

“That’s the crux of life, Piercy boy! So, you still suffer from that nasty period?”

“It still crops up so now and then, yes.”

“As Carl Jung said, people will do anything to avoid confronting their soul, unless the soul forces itself onto the person by some external impulse. To my opinion, this was exactly the thing that happened to you, and you should be grateful, because it helped you out of that abyss.”

“That is neatly spoken, Michael,” Pierce nodded. “Only I haven’t quite risen to my former level. I found it really stinging that Peter suddenly mentioned my aunts. Julia and Ginny were the safeguards of my youth. You always felt this security in their presence: even if you were just visiting for a week or so, and you didn’t see them directly for a whole day, you didn’t feel lonely. I still miss them a lot, you know.”

“Don’t chase the demons of the past, Pierce, we have the many demons of *our* time to deal with.”

“I don’t think it has much changed. We are fighting a pitched battle against an unknown enemy.”

“Indeed... I see you’re tired, Pierce. Go and have a good sleep. It’s hardly the time and place to discuss about such matters.”

“Yeah... I’m done in today,” Pierce sighed. “What’s the time?”

“A quarter past one.”

“Already so late!”

“Well, see it from the sunny side. You will have at least a bit of sleep. I think I’ll be less fortunate.”

“How so?”

“I still have to clean up here, and then in the morning those bloody inspectors coming again, with their truckloads of forms.”

## 2

Friday had come, and Michael was shaving earlier than normal, because of his promise to Peter to come and assist with the cleaning of the chemical waste depot early in the morning. The previous day was almost completely wasted because of the local inspectors, who were scouring every ledger, bank account and receipt. *‘What’s the use of all this double checking? Let them fight it out amongst themselves, those circumlocution officers!’* he mumbled. His mind was pressed. Firstly, the vet had been angry with Michael, because he had put off much too long an important diet for Sheena, and because he had tried to delegate the final stage to a deputy, who was utterly ignorant of the affair. So, he had received a little lesson. In the end, nothing could anymore be done: Sheena had to be put out of her misery. Now the day looked already better. When Michael came down the stairs, Pierce was busy putting breakfast ready. “You’ll have to hurry a bit, Mikey, if you want to catch the bus to Bristol,” he said.

“Oh? Didn’t you promise last night to drop me off with your flashy MG?” Michael said, peering out of the window absentmindedly.

“I don’t recall that, and I’m afraid that she has broken down,” said Pierce.

“Wha? Who?” Michael uttered.

“Hello, where are you? The *car*, of course!” Pierce said.

“Oh, sorry. I think I’ll have a look at *her*, then.”

Michael hopped out of the kitchen door and rounded the house to the garage, where Pierce’s old, two-seated MG could be found. It didn’t take much time to get to a simple diagnosis and a remedy, and he returned to the breakfast table within a quarter of an hour.

“Well?” asked Pierce.

“She is OK now,” said Michael.

“What was it?”

“The petrol level meter. I was already a bit suspicious that it might have got stuck.”

“So, the petrol was finished? Is that it?”

“Indeed! I filled her up from the jerry cans, and she started after a few coughs and splutters. So, the problem is solved.”

Pierce suddenly had to laugh. “You certainly get along much better with cars than with horses. Makes me think of this funny picture you have hanging in the old guest room, where I’m sleeping.”

“You mean the *The New Car* of Alfred Strutt?”

“Yes, I think it is quite hilarious that it is hanging there in the guest room, as if you want to make the impression on the guests that you have ‘broken away’ from the city life, and are self-sufficient, living the simple country life. Well, I can say after all that happened yesterday, and now you suddenly asking me to drop you off with the MG that I start to have serious doubts about this. Aren’t you being a bit inconsequent? You have been driving my MG every day since I’ve been here to help you! And yesterday evening you have been peering at the computer screen for God knows how long.”

“Yes, I see your point,” Michael mumbled. “Have been doing some painstaking searches on the *Tripod*, *Bowls* and the *Throne*. But I also have now some definitive thoughts about the primeval matter.”

“Hmm,” Pierce uttered. “So... you still want to play the adventurer and sail all the way to Syria?”

“Yes, when the time comes. It has been some time since we had a sailing trip.”

“Well, that is going to take quite a lot of time. All the way to Madeira, and then to Gibraltar and further across the Mediterranean; that will require some preparation, I guess.”

“Depends on the winds, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, but are you sure we should go to Damascus at all? It is only a theory still; likely a hoax too.”

“I hope we may soon get further confirmation,” Michael said.

“Oh, well, then I won’t say a thing!”

Both men ate slightly in a hurry, and at the end Pierce said: “I almost would like to join you and see what the snake ring has been doing to the chemical waste depot.”

“Better stay out of this. It is my mess,” said Michael.

“Indeed, and I might do some shopping at the same time,” said Pierce.

The drive was short, and Pierce went off to the ‘hypermarket’ in the centre of Bristol. Michael was left standing before the main building of his former working place, with a small coffer full of books, which he had planned to give to Peter. The building had evidently been modernised not long ago: much steel and glass, with a huge, black granite slab erected before the former entrance. ‘*The Divine Monolith of Arthur C. Clarke*’, Michael deliberated. There was a huge, ugly van parked in front of it and Michael spotted no less than four men in white protective clothing. They were in the process of putting on gas masks. *Chemical Waste Transport & Treatment* it read on the side of the van. CWIT had a reputation of efficiency and was making good money, although there were rumours that they did more transport than treatment.

“Hullo, I’m Michael Willmore, a former employee, and I am supposed to join you to clean up the mess in the waste depot,” he said when he approached the men, who were dressed almost as aliens.

“That’s quite OK, sire,” one of the men said. “We have had word you were coming.”

“Nice. I think I’ll lend one of your suits.”

“You’d better take no risk, and put on all the things we’re wearing.”

Michael was handed a white suit, red boots and blue gloves, and soon he was wearing all the colours of the British standard. The gas mask,



however, he didn't take. "We don't want to incite panic in the *whole* house, do we?" he said.

"There is a bad acid smell, mister," another man said.

"Hmm, you'd better let me in first, then," Michael said. "I'll do a bit of scouting, if you don't mind."

"You know the place well?" the man asked.

"Eleven years ago I was responsible for the place, so I'd better go in and assess the overall situation," Michael replied.

"OK. That takes some of the burdens off our shoulders."

"Except when I don't come out," said Michael, blinking an eye.

They were all strolling towards the elevator in the main reception hall, when the lady receptionist came stepping towards Michael from behind the counter. "Michael, how have you been?"

"Quite well, Vicky. Live and kicking."

"You will take care in the store room, won't you? Most people have avoided it," she said.

"Sure... can you keep this case with you for a while?"

"What is it?" asked Vicky.

"Something for Hartford."

"Ah, nothing *dangerous* I hope?"

"No, no, just books, but wish me luck in the basement," said Michael.

"Indeed, don't try playing the hero, Michael. Some people have passed out in there."

"Really?" asked Michael. It was something Peter hadn't told him, but Vicky was already off carrying the case with her. He joined the four men, and they fitted snugly into the elevator with all their stuff, only to go one floor down, to the basement. Stepping out they found Peter, dressed also in a white protective suit standing before the open door of the storage room, and peering inside."

"Hello Michael. Good of you to come and help us, and that at such an early hour," he said.

“OK guys! I will go in first, and when I don’t come out in ten minutes or so, you come and save me... All right?” They all nodded and then Michael stepped inside.

He was fully convinced there wouldn’t be any great danger, because he knew the place still like his inside pocket, but he had another reason to be there, which all the others couldn’t guess. Upon entering, a pungent smell struck his nose, which he instantly identified as trifluoroacetic acid. *‘Bad stuff if that was spilled here. It might do a lot of harm.’* he contemplated. When inspecting the shelves, he noticed that they were all quite rusty and, indeed as Peter had told, full of small, equally sized holes. Still he saw a chance of using the acid spill as a means to veil his own illegal dump, which comprised no more than a small ring, cast in a piece of lead. Hence, he navigated directly to the familiar corner where the old iodine tubes were stored, far away from the glances of the people standing outside, worriedly peeping inside. Indeed on a nearby shelf it read in Dage Rimmicks’ handwriting: *RADIOACTIVE WASTE, KEEP CLEAR!* Unfortunately, Dage had left the firm six years ago, and could not be of assistance. Michael pulled some plastic bags from the shelf and tried to find the piece of lead. It was not more than a flat cylinder, two inch high and two inches in diameter. He soon located it in a smaller plastic bag, but it was full of holes, which were not found in the other bags. It was nearly as if somebody had been going round it with a paper perforator. He opened the bag and his thick blue glove grabbed at the leaden case. When he lifted it before his eyes, his worst expectations were confirmed: it was full of small ducts, the Ring was gone. Quickly he opened his suit, took out a clean handkerchief, wrapped the piece of metal in it and slipped it in the right pocket of his trousers. Then he closed the zipper of his suit again, and placed the bags full of polystyrene test tubes back onto the shelf. He subsequently went inspecting the lower shelves, which were also fully perforated, all the way down to the floor, where he found even more holes of exactly the same size. Michael concluded that the creature Abraxsyne

had taken its leave. *'A piece of primeval matter melting its way through the earth?'* he wondered. Next he went looking for the trifluoroacetic acid. It was soon found, and confidently he stepped out the room with a small plastic bottle in his hands, which had clearly leaked, but was now almost empty.

"I think I found the culprit, Peter."

Peter looked at the bottle, and said: "That is what you call the *enemy*?"

"No, no! But bad stuff this is too. Maybe this explains all the little holes in the shelves, and the concrete."

"Do you really think so?" asked Peter.

"Yes, I'll go and look a bit more. Just wait a while."

"Just be careful!"

Michael was now heading the other way, and approached a few shelves that were still pristine. There he found the next item he was looking for: a large plastic bottle of purified Montmorillonite. *'That is definitively ingredient number one'*, he deliberated. Then he set course back to the earlier shelves and started looking for a large bottle of mercury. Soon it was found, and it still appeared to be completely intact, as Peter had said. He took the heavy flask from the shelf and stepped out of the storeroom again. "OK if I take these home, Peter?" he asked.

"What is this?" asked Peter.

"Mercury and clay."

"What do you need *those* for?"

"A small experiment."

"Better take care with that mercury," said Peter.

"Do you still have these handy Styrox-boxes, for carrying dry ice?"

"They should be there somewhere, on the right at the end," said Peter.

Michael again stepped inside and proceeded to the backside. He could make out four 20 litre Styrox containers in which the dry ice and liquid nitrogen had been carried around in the laboratory in earlier days, when the regulations were still less tight and you still could do *some* work in the lab, albeit on your own risk. Evidently they had not anymore been in use

for a long time, and they were still serviceable. The last piece of stuff Michael had hoped to retrieve, however, proved difficult to find. It was not on the place where he had left it ten years ago. When carrying all the sizeable Styrox containers outside, Michael asked Peter: "There was also a large brown flask of sulphur somewhere, but I can't find it."

Peter shook his head, with a small grin and said: "That one I have in my office upstairs. I'll get it." Then he marched off.

"OK," said Michael to the CWTT-men, "I needn't detain you any longer. The rest seems to be OK to me, but be careful with loading all those bottles in your plastic cases. They may break easily. I'll be off now and leave you to it." He placed the bottle with clay in one styrox container and the bottle of mercury in the other, and stepped with his precious bounty into the elevator. He went up to the ground floor, and stepped into the reception hall. Peter had returned from his room, and stepping down the stairs, he noticed Michael was already leaving.

"Wait a minute!" Peter exclaimed, "Where are you running off to so soon; aren't you helping any further?"

"Well, aren't these four people in the cellar paid to do the work? I don't think I am further needed here. The problem seems to be a leaking bottle of TFA," Michael said.

"Those men could have spotted a bottle of TFA easily, even *I* could have. And then all these chemicals you are snatching away – here is the sulphur, by the way," said Peter, and handed over a large, old-fashioned brown bottle, with a yellow powder in it. "What are you up to, for heaven's sake!?"

Michael took the bottle and placed it in the styrox box together with the clay. "Getting interested to try out a strange recipe. But related to our earlier discussion, I can show you... wait," he said. He dropped his white protection garments on the floor, unwrapped the piece of lead from his handkerchief and showed it to Peter. "This is what I found. They are the remains of a piece of lead that I cast around this radioactive sample."

“Yes, as you said the day before yesterday, but you called it the *enemy*! Some sort of worm.”

“Yes, so we can call it.”

“So, is there any danger?” asked Peter.

“I think the premises here are quite safe. It is only that the escape of the Ring is very unfortunate. We will have to find her somehow.”

“The Ring? It was a ring, and a... *she*?”

“Yes, Peter... maybe even *the* Ring”

“You mean the Ring *to find them all and in the darkness bind them*? Are you getting daft, Michael?”

“Definitely not! Not that I am so sure, but it seems I have to try and find some explanation what this Ring could have been. I believe her to be an unknown life-form, and she shouldn’t be free.”

“A mythical ring that is alive and dangerous... is that what you are saying?” asked Peter.

“That’s about it, yes... only a hypothesis, still. Didn’t you write something recently about the *primeval matter*, Peter?”

“Yes, I have authored an article about non-baryonic dark matter in the Physical Review. Why do you ask?”

“Well, I find this a rather interesting subject. Say what, Peter, won’t you come and visit me in the weekend, so that we can discuss the matter in more detail?”

“Well, you suddenly sound quite mysterious, Michael.”

“There is something else,” Michael said. He stepped towards the reception window, and asked Vicky to give him his coffer back. He walked back towards Peter. “There are some old books here, and a thesis of my father-in-law. I had some hope if you could browse those through, and then we could discuss about it.”

Inspecting the content of the box, Peter shook his head and said: “That would mean a few days of browsing, Michael.”

“Does Sunday at noon suit you? Sheila will be back, so you can discuss with her about your dreams on the same occasion.”

“Yeah, sure, but what is this all about?”

“Have you ever heard of the *Rishon* model of Harari and Shupe?”

“A bit old hat, really. Not something that has been really proven.”

“I included here a little book with the title *Occult Chemistry*, which was written in 1908. In the light of our investigations, if we might call them so, you might read it... So Sunday at noon it will be?”

“Well, Michael, that is fine with me.”

“OK, see you then. I’ll be off.”

“And I should be returning to this horrible mess in the cellar.”

“Yes. Better to keep a watchful eye on those guys, Peter.”

Peter stepped back towards the elevator, and Michael took up his newly acquired chemicals and stepped outside to wait for Pierce to fetch him. When Pierce arrived, he was complaining that the supermarket was as empty as before. “Could you have imagined a few years earlier a food store of *two* acres that is as empty as a church on Monday?” he asked.

“Oh, yes! Don’t you remember?”

“Wha?” Pierce uttered.

“Didn’t we go to the opening of Wall-Mart’s Hypermarket in 2012 at the height of the EU crisis?”

“Sorry, but...”

“It was just when Obama got re-elected. I said to you then that I wouldn’t be surprised to see all the shelves empty after a few years.”

Pierce drove on silently brooding. He hadn’t even found a jar of proper Scottish marmalade. So he was already planning to prepare some jars himself.

### 3

On the next Saturday, Michael had planned to fetch Sheila with the two-seated MG, and was at the airport at the right time, but Sheila’s flight was

delayed and arrival was estimated an hour late. Michael embarked on reading a pocket book he had found in Pierce's car: *The Aphrodite Inheritance*. It likely belonged to Gillian, judging from the author, Michael J. Bird, and was based on the TV series on which Pierce and Gillian had struck a common interest. He appraised the size of the font and the thinness of the book, and estimated he might just about read it before Sheila would arrive. He was known to be a fast reader, and got nearly halfway through the book, but then, after an hour, he lost interest. No, *Who pays the Ferryman?* had definitively been equipped with a better plot. He recalled that he still had had no opportunity to visit Elounda on Crete, although he had promised it to himself nearly every year. Luckily, Sheila appeared through the slide door a little earlier, but he noticed she had a crutch and was staggering towards him with her left foot in a large white bandage. She was carrying her usual handbag and also pushed a red suitcase on four wheels in front of her.

"Good Lord, Sheila, what on earth has happened to you?" he asked, taking over the large suitcase.

"Just stumbled and strained my ankle during a walk," she replied. "It looks more serious than it is... nothing really broken."

"When did that happen?"

"On Thursday, at the most inconvenient place you can think of: on the top of the Pico Ruivo. We were just stepping downwards, and I was enjoying the scenery so much that I didn't think of the road, which was quite stony. So, I just twitched my ankle, and Maria and Marco had to carry me all the way down to the parking area."

"Well, Pierce's MG is parked quite near, so I'll be able to bring you safely and swiftly home. I'm a bit uncertain whether this new suitcase will fit in the trunk though."

"Oh, what's wrong with our van?" asked Sheila.

"Nothing, but lately I have been enjoying Pierce's MG, and thought of using it on this festive occasion."

“Bit unhandy in my present state, it is so damn low. I’m hardly able to get in with this crutch and bandage,” Sheila complained.

“Didn’t know, did I? You said nothing about your predicament on the phone last night, neither that you would have extra luggage. What have you been buying there ‘n all?”

“Clothes, also for you! They are quite stylish. I think you will be pleased. Found also one of those funny straw hats for Pierce.”

“Well, thanks for remembering us,” said Michael.

They proceeded slowly to the exit, and after a hundred yards, the red MG of Pierce came in sight on the parking strip. The new suitcase fitted snugly in the trunk, not leaving space even for a toothbrush, and Sheila folded herself with some effort inside the front seat. It was only then that they were able to leave the airport comfortably enough.

“How are Maria and Marco getting along?” asked Michael.

“Quite OK with Marco, but last Sunday Maria played the organ for the last time. It was a bit of a sad occasion really.”

“Gosh, poor Maria. So it was the arthrosis?”

“Yeah, but she got along quite well despite it all. At the end of the service she played the variations on the *Te Deum* of Tournemire. It’s full of interesting dissonances, and it’s very loud. She pulled out all the stops! Maria really gave that priest, Basilio, a final lesson. He had instantly fled outside and we didn’t see him anymore. When it was all over, I gave Maria a long hug, and we both had to cry.”

“Oh, really? Hmm... Had the priest been complaining again about the music she was playing?”

“No, but his strain of Catholicism didn’t suit Maria. He was constantly complaining that his church didn’t need an organ. Anyway, it was a delight hearing dad’s organ again. The Tournemire piece was interesting. It was only just now, in the plane travelling back, that I suddenly recognised the little allusion to our little secret.”

“What do you mean?”



“Well, you know the theme of the *Holy Grail* ... in the movie of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, don’t you?”

“Oh Yeah... You mean that John Williams adopted Tournemire’s organ music in his soundtrack?”

“Quite on purpose, I believe: they are based on the Gregorian chant of the *Te Deum*.”

“Ah, I see. Clever girl! Maria is an angel and a heroine,” said Michael.

“Yes, and she has had her share of suffering. She told me all kinds of interesting things.”

“Oh? What kind of things?”

“Well, that was more women’s talk, Michael... nothing really for your ears...”

“You mean she has some sort of secret?”

“I will not comment,” said Sheila.

Michael was thus silent, and drove calmly on the wet highway. The rain had stopped, the clouds were clearing, and the sun was already peeping through.

“So, how did Pierce cope with the farm?” Sheila asked.

“Quite well, I think. He is always enthusiastically driving the tractor, but milking the cows at five in the morning seems to please him less well.”

“Yeah, I’m afraid he will have to stay on for another week, otherwise I’ll have to find a stand-in.”

“Gillian is still in Russia, and she doesn’t seem to be in any hurry to return to Manor’s Green, so I think Pierce will stay on with pleasure. He has still some problems with being alone at Manor’s Green, you know.”

“Ah, I see, well... that’s great news for me anyway! What about Sheena?”

“She was put down... on Thursday,” said Michael.

“Oh, how sad... At what time?”

“Quarter past two in the afternoon.”

“Exactly the time I strained my ankle,” Sheila said.

“That’s odd... What would that mean?” After a silent moment Michael said: “By the way, one of your past admirers comes to visit tomorrow.”

“Oh? Which one of them?”

“Peter Hartford.”

“Oh! Nice! How is *he* faring?” Sheila asked.

“He just left Inventura.”

“Hmm. He has been quite *persevering*, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, I suppose he gets a good pension, because he served even overtime. He was very pleased with himself when he appeared in the pub. Still, I had the impression he wanted to see *you* more than me.”

“Oh, you think he still has an eye on me?”

“Maybe, but I think it has more to do with odd, recurring dreams.”

“Oh, how very exciting!”

“I also have to mention that our little serpent has escaped.”

“You mean Abraxyné?” Michael nodded affirmatively. “You think that means trouble?”

“Difficult to say, but the forces of deception seem to be on the move, and we should do all we can to find her back. I am thinking of involving Peter.”

“I don’t see how *he* can help.”

“I have to check one theory at least, which is related to the origin of the axes and the ring and concerns the *prima materia*.”

“A bit queer hobby, if you ask me, and what does Peter know about such things?”

“Quite a lot, judging from his latest publications on quantum field theory. It has something to do with the formation of unformed matter by the zero point energy.”

“*Formation of unformed matter*... doesn’t that sound a bit paradoxical?”

“Maybe, but this is only a side path. At least I have cleared up where the Bowls of Gyges and the Throne of Midas are to be found, and the new peace in Syria can be considered as a good sign too,” said Michael.

Silence fell, and Sheila was trying to enjoy the sunshine for the rest of the trip home. It was clear she was tired and she nearly fell asleep. They got home just in time for dinner. Despite his duties in the pub in the cellar, Pierce had been cooking a fine meal and was all in good spirits. The news that he should stay on for another week did not disturb him; in fact, he was very happy with the extension. The white straw hat from Madeira he kept on his head whilst they were eating. Soon conversation embarked on Damascus.

"I have got into contact with Eric and Sylvia," Michael started, "and they seem to be fine. They have at least safely survived the Civil War. They were sorry for not keeping in contact, but they have been so very busy. They keep a popular restaurant on the road from Beirut to Damascus, named *Bristol Gardens*, and I had a long talk with them both. I have asked them to take up contact with the Abbey of the Rose Cross, and even, with Maria's permission, asked them to convey the news to the monastery that the *Cross of Sharon* has been found, and can be returned, whenever they want. Eric told me that things have calmed down in Syria. Now, the UN has installed the Middle-East Task Force, METFOR, close to Damascus, and five huge refugee camps have been set up by the Red Cross in various parts of the country," said Michael.

"So Eric might help us a bit," said Pierce.

"Yes, they are quite willing to help. I suppose we should give them a call again," said Michael.

"What about the Bowls of Gyges?" asked Sheila

"They have been found. An English group of archaeologists have originally retrieved them from the temple site at Delphi, but they were kept in the Ashmolean Museum. Since many years they have been on loan to the Daleside Museum in Dwindleford."

"Dwindleford!" Sheila exclaimed. "Where might *that* be?"

"In the north of Yorkshire," said Michael.

"Ah, I see!" Sheila laughed. "What about the Throne of Midas?"

“Well... I came to know that this throne must be a possession kept by the Phrygian monarchs,” said Michael.

“How did you figure that out?” asked Sheila.

“I followed the proceedings of the coronation of the new King of Phrygia in Turkey, Hamid. You haven’t heard?”

“Never heard there was a Kingdom of Phrygia, neither heard of their kings,” said Pierce.

“Well, it was live on TV the other day. Quite a rich Kingdom it seems to be, and during the coronation Hamid sat on a throne that is seldom seen on television. I made some inquiries, and the consul in London informed me that the throne is always safely locked away, because it is made of solid gold. When I asked whether it could be the throne of Midas, he had a good laugh, but yesterday he called me again, and said that it was not unlikely the former throne of king Midas, which was returned to Phrygia from Delphi ages ago!”

“How remarkable,” said Sheila.

“So, how are we going to get this throne back to Delphi?” asked Pierce.

“That may prove a somewhat tedious matter, but we have a little bit of luck: It seems Benji knows King Hamid.”

“Benji, you mean Benjamin Miller?” asked Sheila.

“Yes, he is actually on quite good terms with him.”

“Well, the surprises never end,” Sheila laughed.

Then Michael turned to Pierce. “I found this little book in your car, by Michael J. Bird: *The Aphrodite Inheritance*. Have you read that?”

“Gillian had it and I took it with me to refresh my memory,” said Pierce.

“Hardly anything people would look at nowadays. Such stories have gone completely out of fashion. Why?” asked Michael.

“There were a few things in that story that struck me. First, there was this *Tomb of Aphrodite*, as depicted in the final episode: it resembled a bit the

one we found on Madeira. There is also a camera shot of an axe on the wall exactly like the ones we have been reburying in Syria.”

“Hardly surprising: it was a common votive offering of the Greek blacksmith. So, you still have a video recording of the TV series?”

“Gillian has, yes. We looked at it again. The little book is really very superficial, but the TV series is quite good actually, even after such a long time.”

“What was the other thing that struck you?”

“The idea that the Gods might still protect in some way their heritage, which is the main theme of the story. You see, most of these things buried in Delphi were votive offerings, which means property of the Gods,” explained Pierce.

“You mean to say that things go badly for those who steal those treasures?”

“Particularly when stealing the offerings, yes.”

“To *all those who believe it possible*, it reads at the beginning. Hardly something for this time, is it?”

“Gillian believes in it. And then we call ourselves Christians, don’t we? Is that so different?”

## 4

On Sunday Peter had punctually arrived at twelve, somewhat out of breath due to the long walk from the bus stop to the Willmore house carrying a coffer full of books. He plopped down in the wooden sofa in the kitchen, and he puffed: “A bit too much for me to carry at this age.” He seemed slightly confused, and tired.

Sheila said: “Have a peaceful cup of fresh coffee, Peter, and let’s get to business after that.”

Peter thus relaxed in the kitchen for a while with his coffee. Then they all retreated in the drawing room. Sitting down in the middle of the settee,

putting Michael's case with books beside him, which he meant to return, Peter looked around appreciatively, and said: "Nice spacious room."

"You've been OK, Peter?" asked Sheila.

"Oh, yeah, yeah, nothing serious... no diseases, enjoy my fishing, and my new editorship of the New Journal of Physics. Without wanting to boast, I have to say I'm still going strong. It's only that the literature Michael gave me was a bit surprising."

"You mean to say that there is some truth in it?" asked Michael.

"From the side of science I would say that Besant and Leadbeater were very shrewdly using the early atomic theories of van 't Hoff and Babbitt, and hung it onto the teachings of Emmanuel Swedenborg, who said that matter was made up of a hierarchy of particles increasing in size, being composed of closed vortices of very high energy, which give the appearance of solidity."

"So, my concern was correct?"

"I wouldn't be concerned, but *striking* it certainly is, particularly their first clairvoyant observations on hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen. If we assume they were looking at the *diatomic molecules* instead of the atoms, then their observations were quite well corresponding to the Rishon model of the *V* and *T* particles of Harrari and Shupe."

"So, I wasn't far off?" said Michael.

"No, but I couldn't miss appraising a little detail in the study, at which I greatly marvelled. They propose that there is a four-level build-up of atoms, and one of their forms, the proto-elemental matter coincides strangely with a theory I have been working on already for some time."

"And that concerns, as you said once, some state of undifferentiated matter, was it not?" asked Michael.

"Indeed! Surely, the quarks could quite well group together in a suspended form of matter, yet not crystallising into protons and neutrons, when emerging from the matter-antimatter funnel at high gravity. I call it S-matter; see it as some form of undercooled liquid. However, the

crystallisation can be induced by very, very subtle influences, like introducing a crystallisation point into it; I might even imagine that *thought* or *Will Power* can induce it to crystallise into a form according to the patterns of the thought, or it might act according to thought. It would also be able to eat itself through ordinary matter in the way this ring could have done.”

“I got the impression that the Alchemists were dealing with that kind of stuff, and were able to even produce it from ordinary matter by the alchemical process, leading to the philosopher’s stone.”

“Ah, so the philosopher’s stone would be S-matter? Well... I’m afraid that in my theory that is not possible.”

“Do you think there could still be some primary material around, which could be multipliable?”

“Multipliable? That it *surely* is, yes. You are familiar with the process of crystallisation, aren’t you?” said Peter.

“John was also on to this, you see.”

“Yes... well... I’d not dwell on this any further and say only that his thesis is mathematically solid, but he unfortunately mixed up a few concepts. What he writes about the structure of matter, however, was in great lines already proposed before he wrote this thesis, and up till now we have not seen any real practical use of the theory, for instance, in practical computing code.”

Peter stared at the ceiling. He rubbed his chin slowly, and it seemed another matter was on his mind. “There is something else that came up, Michael. I suddenly remembered something related to a *Ring*. It was about five years ago that we had this guest at Inventura... He was a military guy, working for NATO, and he had some role in developing these new bandages for treatment of burning injuries, some work that came out of our Dutch cooperation. You remember?”

“Yes, yes,” Michael nodded.

“Well, this guy actually found a silver ring in the building site, when we were getting our new entrance. Somehow he had spotted it in the pit where they were digging for the foundations of this huge piece of Finnish granite.”

“Ah, that Arthur C. Clarke-monolith-thing,” Michael jested.

“Yes, that one,” said Peter with an amused twinkle in his eye. “So, this bloke had taken the ring inside and asked Vicky if it was belonging to somebody working there. After some clarification, it appeared nobody had lost a silver ring, neither the construction men, so he was allowed to keep it... as some sort of souvenir. It was just an hour after you had left that I suddenly remembered this incident. I asked Vicky about it, and she remembered the case quite clearly too. She said that the ring didn’t look particularly precious, so...”

“Ah, I see. So now somebody could be actually *wearing* it!” said Michael.

“Possibly, yes...”

Michael lifted his left hand with two fingers, and said: “Maybe I didn’t quite tell the truth at the time, but these fingers in fact had to be amputated, because of this ring. It *was* radioactive, you know.”

“Well, poor Michael,” said Peter. “How could I have ever guessed?”

“You couldn’t have, I kept it all very secret. Now it seems we possibly have a new victim, who has been carrying it already for 5 years! You really don’t remember his name?”

“I could have consulted my files on that, if I hadn’t thrown them all away last week!” said Peter.

“Well, there we are on a dead end then,” Michael said.

There was a long silence, and Peter’s eyes were rolling around. This was something that alarmed Michael, because it was, indeed, not at all the Peter Hartford he had known. He was actually a bit nervous.

“No need for alarm, Peter,” said Michael. “I think we have now some good chance of finding this ring back.”

“Maybe, yes... yes,” Peter said.



“What about your dream?” asked Sheila.

Peter suddenly stopped staring at the ceiling and faced Sheila. “Well, that is the most *curious* thing! The dream was quite strong, repeating itself for some three or four nights. In it was this serpent biting its own tail.”

“That is a very common dream symbol,” said Sheila. “It is a symbol of the union of opposites, but also of the dormant, sleeping consciousness.”

“It was also the famous dream of Kekulé,” said Michael.

“Yes, yes, I was aware of that, but it was much longer: First it crawled around on the ground of my *greenhouse*, and gobbled up all my precious groceries. I scolded it, that it had no business in my garden. Then it came to rest, and formed a circle. Two men came in, one in golden robes and one in silver robes, and they started to dig in the ground, where the serpent had marked the spot. After some time they had dug quite deep, and a black lady appeared. She was quite alive, and the two men started to wash her clean of the soil. In the end, she was quite white, as white as marble.”

“Blimey,” said Michael.

“Is that all you can say?” said Sheila teasingly. “This doesn’t help our patient at all.”

“But, *think*, Sheila!” said Michael, “This is related to our mystery!”

“Which mystery?” Sheila exclaimed.

“The riddle of Mnemosyne!”

“Sorry, I don’t follow,” said Sheila. “What are you saying?”

“Digging up Leto, the mother of Apollo and Artemis, I just happened to read about it the other day, in the *Atalanta Fugiens*,” said Michael. He stepped towards the bookshelf and took a thick leather-bound volume from the highest shelf. He gave it to Sheila, opened it at a spot where there was a bookmark, and said: “Read for yourself.”

Sheila recited from the book of Michael Maier, epigram 11: “*Everyone knows Latona’s twins, who, according to the legend, were children of Jupiter. Others assert that the twins were a union of the sunlight and the moon, which has black stains*”

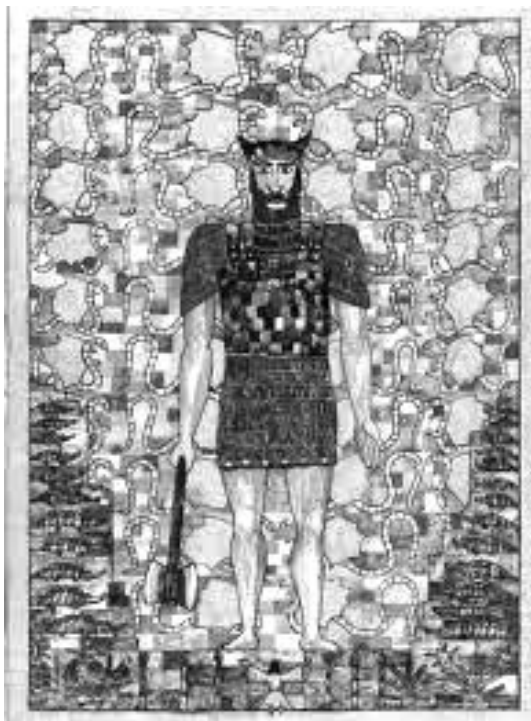
*on its face. Therefore get yourself ready to make Latona white. And without delay tear up the unclear books, which harm you.”*

“I think our theories are all quite inadequate, Peter. Better for us to start doing something practical,” said Michael.

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## PART II

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*The axe of Izdubar*

## 5. From the Scrolls of Democritus

*Interludium alterum* ❧

### I



One of those unhappy days of drought it was, when the vine, likewise my own soul, was down in misery. I had wondered in loneliness for two months that summer, and reflected that life was cruel, senseless, and without purpose. And then, on that remarkable day, it all started. I was slumbering on my bed, when suddenly I became aware of a presence, and observed a vague shadow moving across the wall. When I turned round, grabbing my dagger, in the belief that a villain was about to take my precious life, I encountered the perplexed face of my former pupil Hippocrates, who had silently entered my premises.

“My dear friend,” he said, “did I startle you? What anxiety troubles your mind that you point your scalpel, so miserable and small, so fiercely towards your beloved apprentice, who all the way from Kos comes to pay you tribute?”

My spirits lifted at once. I apologized, and mentioned that my behaviour of late was due to the suspicious glances of the people of Abdera and that I had received an admonition from my neighbour that they wanted to send me away.

“But, my valued Democritus,” Hippocrates sighed, sitting down at my side on the bedstead, with a troubled glance, and lowering a leather satchel on the floor, “What for? Do they not owe their very safety and wealth to you, our wise and cheerful philosopher? How have you managed to extinguish the trust of your fellowmen? Are you ill?”

I told him the following news: “I have been in good health, surely, but I have been making such a habit of toiling in my laboratory lately that people have become suspicious of my acts. When they visit me and ask what I do,

I can tell them nothing, due to the nature of my investigations, and thus I have resolved to merely laugh at them, and say: *'Nature rejoices with Nature; Nature conquers Nature; Nature restrains Nature'*, as I always do."

"Have you been busy, my friend, making new discoveries, perhaps?"

"Truly," I said, "I have been occupied with evoking *potable gold*, and now I have produced *Electrum Solis*."

"*Electrum Solis*? The magical metal in real?" asked Hippocrates.

"Truly! Certainly not the ordinary coin metal," said I.

"And how did you craft it?"

"From silver - or bronze - with the amalgam of Iron. First, you whiten it with cinnabar mixed with olive oil - you can also use vinegar, honey, brine or alum - then make it yellow with bile, or chalcanth, or sulphur. Then, when you add the lot to Mercurium you will get a golden colour, and it will become *Electrum*."

"Surely, I must procure some of it, if you can spare it. It would be a good defence against *agitatos tenutis*," said the physician. Then he asked: "Where is Kundris, your spouse?"

"She has left me," I said demurely.

"But why?" Hippocrates exclaimed in great astonishment.

"She wanted her freedom back," said I with a deep sigh.

"Have you been in a row?"

"No, She died of *pluritis*," I said. "Now I feel lonely and I'm struck down with depression every day."

"Why didn't you call on me? I have a cure for *pluritis*."

"There wasn't time. It all went so quickly. I had barely returned from a long and tiresome journey to Athens."

"Poor friend, what a loss."

"How am I going to manage without her?" I whined.

"It will come with time," said Hippocrates.

We were silent for a little while, but then Hippocrates' inquisitiveness got the better of him. "So, what about the potable gold: have you actually made it?"

"I've made it. Yesterday," said I.

"How, how!" Hippocrates urged.

I explained that it took only a few painstaking and dangerous steps. "Dissolve a tiny bit of gold in *Aqua Regia*, and crystallize the yellow crystalline golden salt, then dissolve it in rain water, and bring to the boil. Then just add a glass of white wine, and a red colour develops upon further boiling," I explained.

"*WHITE* wine, turning into *RED* wine?"

"Indeed, so it appears. I thus called it *Purple Gold*."

"Would it be any good in my work, a treatment, or even cure?" my pupil pondered.

"Surely, my teacher Hermes III the Great, has related to me that a few drops a day will give you a long and healthy life, and you will never look a bit the elder," said I. "However, the only useful thing I've made with it is this wonderful tainted glass, all the most beautiful red, purple and blue for decoration, particularly for wine bottles."

My friend shook his head he said: "You can't be mad!"

"Verily, no, but who claims so?" I asked.

"In truth, I have to admit that I've come here on the counsel of my son-in-law, Polybus, who heard rumours that you must have become insane."

"May I then guess that the gossip has spread all the way to Kos? Would Kundris' brother, Argus, have been spreading the rumour? He went to Kythnos in a bad mood!"

"Polybus heard in Kythnos that the pride of my father, Heraclides, and the consolation of my troubled mother, Praxitela, had gone crackpot, and upon return home informed me."

“I didn’t lose my mind: it was my *wife* that I lost! So you are here to cure me, after all?”

“Initially, I had such purpose, but now that you have enlightened me about your new works in the realm of alchimia, and that you’ve lost your beloved Kundris, I found the explanation, and I have to conclude quite the opposite. If you are now becoming the practical alchemist, and are alone, I might have something for you that you could use, something precious, something mystical and secret.”

I enquired: “You are confident to trust your teacher with anything of that kind?”

“Truly, I have found no use of it myself. Never have I been able to communicate with it, although Parmenides said it was an unspeakable source of wisdom and ancient lore, of which he had been able to elude only a minor twinkle. When he gave it to me, I was still a little lad, ignorant of all the secrets of the world, and surely not so entitled to its possession, I’m sure, since all this time its secrets have not been revealed to me. Maybe I can pass it on to you, in exchange for some of the *Electrum Solis* you have so diligently prepared.” Hippocrates opened his leather valise, and raised before my eyes a small sandalwood box. He opened it, saying: “As you always say: *Nature rejoices with Nature*,’ and so on... it may be time for you to meet the all-source of Wisdom, that you may laugh even more, and be the more knowledgeable at the same time.”

I observed a golden ring of fine craftsmanship glittering in the sunlight of the high noon. It was placed in a small glass jar within the box. “Would this be the ring of Gyges, of which Socrates has spoken, an instrument for making oneself vanish before people’s eyes,” I asked.

“Certainly not,” said Hippocrates, “Gyges was indeed very well visible to the wife of Candaules, otherwise the lineage of Lydian Kings would not have fallen to the Mermnadai, and possibly the Pythian oracle would not have risen to such great esteem it has today. No, Socrates only spoke of this ring by means of allegory in his argument on Justice. How people

would be tempted to commit crime, if they could be sure never to get caught. Still, I would say that this ring is even more powerful.”

“Powerful in which way,” I asked, “as you admitted not to have benefitted from it yourself?”

“We are your disciples still, and we hope you may someday be able to grasp the whole *Circle of Science*. This ring is called *Abraxyne*. It is the Sacred Serpent, and she has come all the way from Egypt, carrying all the treatises of Nature. She has been the consort and inspiring flame of Mnemosyne, the Goddess, and mother of the Muses, so I’ve heard from Parmenides.”

“The consort of the Goddess, this?” I stammered.

“Verily, I tell you, she has been carried from Pharaoh to Pharisee, then to Heraclitus and Parmenides. As a friend of my family, Parmenides gave it to me when he was lying on his deathbed, that I might be shielded from confusion and vanity.”

“Strange, on my visits he never spoke to me about this ring... and have you been guarded from these dangerous vices?” I asked.

“Poorly! In my profession some vanity at least is needed as an instrument of cure; to be able to doubt on the inside and to seem the wiser on the outside, not to upset the confidence of the patient, sometimes giving him bee’s wax as a cure for anxiety,” said Hippocrates staring at the ceiling of my humble dwelling.

“And now you give it to me, without further thought?” I asked.

“I have had many years opportunity to wield it, but - alas - its larger secrets remained hidden. I have given it a very great deal of thought and experiment, in fact. When I set out on this long trip, I deduced: My master is either afflicted, but then he may be cured - by me - or he is up to something ingenious, and therefore, in both cases a worthy recipient of the ring of wisdom.”

“You praise me too highly, my dear friend. I only fool around with elementary principles of Nature to make something novel and rare.”



“Making *Electrum Solis* is all but ‘fooling around’ and I need it for a new cure,” said my friend sternly.

“But you can make it all yourself, when I give you the recipe.”

“True, but I rather have you make it, and I will trust the outcome more. I have no talent for metallurgy. Herbs and weeds, yes. Curing salts and rocks, yes, but, Mercury and Silver, and Gold, for all; no, it’s not my branch,” the famous healer said demurely. “You have also the proper tools now in your *Laboratorium*, as you call it.”

“Then I will be happy to make for you all the *Electrum* you need,” I promised.

“Are you deriving all your terms nowadays from these Roman barbarians?”

“Truly, I do: the Romans will shape the next stage of civilisation,” I replied.

“The Romans, those crude ruffians? You must be fooling!”

I stared at the Ring, this strange creation, a little serpent, indeed, completely at rest, having devoured its own tail. I took it from its glass container and it felt as if there was animated life in it. “Hermes III told me that the *Winds of Wisdom* blow from the East, therefore, I must conclude that Wisdom travels westward. Did Aeneas not travel to the west to found his New troy? Now Greece is going down, therefore Rome is rising.”

During this statement I was about to put the Ring on my finger, when Hippocrates jumped at me saying: “Don’t carry it around openly, and certainly not on your finger. Keep it in this box, in this glass jar. It should be concealed from the gaze of the profane, and it will burn the very finger on which you carry it.”

“It feels warm,” I said, “but it is hardly hot enough to do any harm.”

“Parmenides warned me not to carry it. I was only ten years old when he gave me this Ring, and when I, in my youthful foolishness, disregarded his advice, see the result!” He showed me his left hand, and I noticed one finger was badly scarred.

“My poor friend, what has happened to your hand, the precious instrument of inspection and cure?”

“A strange burning injury it was. It didn’t leave with normal bandage and *Red Sun Tincture*. Even your kind gift of *potable silver* didn’t help. The life force of this creature is alien to our own,” he replied.

“A living creature you say? But this is a metal ring, a *Golden* ring, surely, but just a metal; metals are not *alive*!”

“That is what you say, but Heraclitus had obtained the Ring from a high Pharisee, who told him that the serpent had instructed him everything about the *Tree of Life*. Heraclitus came across one of its secrets, just by chance, when one day he had dissolved a blue pigment in *aqua spiritus*, as it is called in the Roman tongue, and when he dropped the ring in it the liquid started to light up. There was blue light coming from it, such plentiful that he could read by it at night!”

“How marvellous,” I stammered.

“Heraclitus tried to unveil its secrets, but in vain. He gave the Ring to Parmenides out of pure frustration at the end of his life.”

“I would not have believed it, if not for your truthful account, that the Preacher of Fire would have tried to extract secrets from devices that he himself was so anxious to extinguish.”

“Maybe it is so that the burner of the Phrygian temples was not in favour of the Goddess. However, Parmenides was more trusted: namely, he had immersed Abraxyne in the same liquid that Heraclitus had prepared, but he used a glass with a thin golden rim, and the glass started to speak to him. In this way, he conversed with the Sacred Serpent, albeit only briefly. He wrote a few notes, which he gave to me. Thus, hereby I also hand over the poem of Parmenides that goes with the Ring.”

With this he lifted a small bunch of fine crafted papyrus scrolls out of his bag, pushed them in my lap and deeply sighed, as if relieved from a terrible burden.

“My good friend!” I exclaimed, “Let me treat you a good meal at the tavern of Laertes. You must be hungry after your long trip! This calls for a celebration!”

“It is also thirst for the celebrated wine in the best tavern in this district that has made me set out to Abdera,” said Hippocrates, and we both laughed heartily when we set out to Laertes’ tavern.

## II

After having enjoyed a splendid dinner, we decided to return to my parental estate to have some further discussion over a bottle of white wine. We discussed about the *apeiron* – the One Fabric of the Cosmos – and then about the nature of the void and the atoms. I also returned to the teachings I had received in Hermopolis. I explained to Hippocrates: “Now, even after the instructions of Hermes III the Great, when I was still young, I have seen too much deprivation and war, and my learning has helped but little.”

“Conflict is rising again,” said Hippocrates.

“You may be quite right, my friend. Truly, it started already far before I was born, when Xerxes and his army crossed Thrace. In passing my father’s mansion here, he and his party were given a royal treat, as a courtesy to the great foe, who, as all had hoped, would see the Thracians as neutral in their strife with the Greeks. My father made his attempt to reason with him, and impress on him not to engage in futile war.”

“Athenocritus was a wise man, and it is a shame I never came to know him in person. He was a wealthy and influential person, who put a lot at stake in his dealings with the Persian ruler,” Hippocrates commented.

“Very true, as you say! After a fierce discussion, my father coaxed Xerxes to set a wager: when he would lose the battle he would bestow on my father half of his fortune, otherwise - in the case of victory for the Persians - my father would hand over to Xerxes half of *his* fortune, which was also not little. Despite all the gestures of good will, my father’s forecast

proved correct: In less than one year Xerxes' army was defeated during one of those many battles of the fleets at Salamis. The Persians were soon under siege by Egypt too, and thus Xerxes was stopped, and he crawled back to Persia via Thrace. Arriving in Abdera, he was cordially received by my father again, who offered him protection, even at the risk of falling out of grace in the senate. Here both Athenocritus and Xerxes proved to be men of their word: Xerxes left my father a fortune in gold, and he rewarded him also with Almitra as our counsellor. She was the mother of Argus and Kundris. They also became part of our household, because Xerxes didn't want to separate the family."

"So you have told me many times, and from these sages you have received many early teachings, and, in the end, a worthy spouse," said Hippocrates.

"It is as you say, and thus I will not dwell on these matters further. Still, for the Greeks things were looking favourable only for a little while, and various collisions with the Lacedaemonians soon ensued after the Persian attempts to conquer Greece."

"You don't need to remind me of all the facts known to all those who live under the Greek Sun," my friend commented.

Still, I continued: "A few years after peace was made with Persia, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the 83<sup>rd</sup> Olympiad, I set out to Egypt by the advice of Kundris, and thus I came under the instruction of Hermes the Third, who ran a school at Hermopolis. He had many pupils, young and old, a few of which he initiated in the old Egyptian mysteries. Although I only received the general teachings, I realised that we in Greece live in a lesser age, certainly as it comes to our preparation for the after-life."

"You had scribed it all down?" asked Hippocrates.

"Yes, but only His most important axioms, when I was travelling to the East. Other pupils were writing down the Lower Mysteries, and they had been much longer in his school, but of the Higher Mysteries nobody can even speak."

“Which pupils did you meet there?” asked Hippocrates.

“Menander of Corinth, my father’s old friend, was the only one I recognised of old. There was also Hermes’ own son, Tat, maybe fifteen years of age at that time, who has likely inherited his father’s position. The most promising pupil was also about fifteen years of age. Hermes took him under his special care, because he said he was the beloved of Thoth, calling him *Mai-en-Thoth*. For us Greeks his name was Manetos. I myself was also still young and must have been the most obstinate among the apprentices, but in the end Hermes was able to convey to me his theories in a more scholarly fashion during a conversation that took the whole night. I heard that Hermes died just a few days before the Peloponnesian War started. He must have been ninety years old.”

“Well, that is a respectable age. Who was his father?”

“Hermes the second, of course, also called the Shepherd of Man, Poimandros. He is said to have lived for three hundred years.”

“And *his* father was...?”

“The God Hermes himself, who is called Tehut in Egypt, is this not clear?”

“Ah... So Tat and Hermes III are direct descendents of the god Hermes?”

“It is more so that Tehut once lived as a man among the Egyptians in Thebes, as Asclepius lived in Memphis. He was the God of the Arts and Sciences and the Scribe of the Gods, the inventor of hieroglyphics, and patron and protector of all archives of the ancient Egyptian temples. Have I not told you all this?”

“Yes, yes, I know that, but my memory is now weak. You said all these ancient libraries have been lost.”

“Indeed, at the time I was in Hermopolis, only a few inscriptions had been preserved in the old temples, and the teachings of the Lower Mysteries had already somewhat changed from the original ancient Egyptian cult. Hermes III told me that it was particularly the Great Flood

that had destroyed the writings. The mystery school of Poimandros, after the flood, thus tried to record the teachings on papyrus, and they were still written in the old script. Hermes III, however, had largely rewritten them in the new Egyptian language, and he had persuaded Manetos to transcribe it all into Greek. I wonder what has happened to him.”

“And after your sojourns in the East, you returned to Abdera and started a school yourself, so I heard.”

“Yes. On my return I called on my old teacher Leucippus to establish a new school, to propagate the general teachings of Hermes III, and try to incorporate them in the Pythagorean and Eleatic tradition. But it was at a time that things were going poorly for Greece: When after the Megarian decree the conflict with the Lacedaemonians again escalated, I reasoned a whole night with Leucippus, and I decided to go to Athens to speak to Pericles. But then I heard of this Great Plague, so I returned to Thrace. Then Pericles died and Greece began to fall apart. Some years passed in pondering the purpose of all this decline and bloodshed, which didn’t seem to relent. Protagoras lived in Athens at the time and was able to mediate some of my admonitions to Pericles just before his death. Despite attempts to reconciliation, things then got very bad: Protagoras and Anaxagoras were banished from Athens. When, finally, peace came about, the morale of the Greeks was badly shattered. Herodotus’ truthful voice of history had been smothered too. Still there was no end to treacherous schemes, even after the peace of Nicias.”

“Indeed, as we all have seen,” Hippocrates inserted.

“As you also know, with Leucippus I tried to counter the decay in moral order through our school, and in our endeavour we got some initial support from Anaxagoras and Protagoras, who were on good terms with Pericles, himself a great scholar. But, alas, I got into disagreement with Anaxagoras about the relation between the One and the All, and about the mental nature of the universe. In short, his *Seeds* and my *Atoms* got badly confused, and he found the teachings of Hermes III hard to digest. On top

of it all, Protagoras, who had returned to Abdera and was my best friend and supporter, and who I saw nearly every day, suddenly died. Leucippus also died in the war, only a few days before the peace of Nicias. By now our school has been abolished. So, you will understand that my grip on training the young and on directing worldly affairs against corruption has remained feeble, and now in the Schools of Athens the ancient philosophy is dying out.”

“As you know, my dear Democritus, the deceit never ceases in this world.”

“True. We have seen this ten years ago, when Alcibiades, always envious to Nicias due to the peace that bears his name, and just about to set out for Sicily to aid the Lacedaemonians, became the object of sly contrivances. He was accused to have participated in the mutilation of various statues prior to the great feast of Adonis, and to have made sacrilegious performances of the sacred mysteries during a meeting with his friends, all allegedly in a state of drunkenness. The disfigured faces along the streets terrified many, and the accounts of his disgraceful meetings aggravated the whole population of Athens against him. Still, they let him sail with Nicias, only to call him back at a critical moment for his trial. You have seen the result of all this treachery: Alcibiades changed sides to Lacedaemon, and the Athenians lost the battle in Sicily.”

“Unfortunately so,” said Hippocrates, “quite a blow for the good name of the family of Megacles it was too.”

“My dear friend, I then realised that Athenian democracy itself was in danger. In the heat of the debate I went to Athens and tried to explain in the senate that Alcibiades was not the sort of man that would disgrace the sacred rites, and warn them that the Lacedaemonians would not only defend Sicily under him, but that Athens itself would be at stake. Still, nobody recognised me and I merely collected laughs. YOU they all seem to know! They fell about their bellies laughing, when I stated that you had been my pupil. Luckily, Socrates spoke up for me, but now, after this

endless war in the Peloponnese, when there is peace again, and when under Trasybulus the democracy has been restored, and they are planning to rebuild Athens, Socrates has been accused of spreading poisonous doctrines to the youths of Athens, and Meletus has accused him of being an atheist.”

“So, it is as I said,” Hippocrates sighed, “always there is a poisonous snake-mind at work in one dark corner or other, waiting for the right opportunity to infuse its sulphurous principles. But, I am confident that Socrates is strong and can speak for himself.”

“So true, my friend! Socrates is by far the better in his reasoning, although less in his learning, I would say.”

“Maybe true, maybe false, but in this ordeal Socrates will prevail, I’m certain,” said Hippocrates.

“The magistrates and teachers have a hard time in Athens nowadays. The town resembles a disturbed ant-hill: displaced youths ransack the streets, leaving havoc and ashes behind. Surely, they have been first demoralised and then indoctrinated, but to accuse Socrates of it all... utterly absurd! I decided to visit Athens again and support him, but it was of no avail. I again collected merely laughs.”

“Why take sides in such a disturbed situation? This is not the way the wise act,” commented Hippocrates.

“True! When I returned to Thrace, I rather tried not to think about the future. I buried myself in my laboratorium, and took care of Kundris, who had fallen severely ill during my absence. Argus had been powerless, and now Kundris has left the world of the living. What to do now? I’m broken with grief.”

“I cannot advise you, other than urge you to apply to yourself the rules you have made for others,” said Hippocrates. “Do you not remember the bitter lesson you gave old King Darius when he had lost his wife, and he came to you for counsel how to raise her from the dead? Maybe you shouldn’t have humiliated Him so deeply!”



“You are my truthful friend, and thus I can say to you that I am embarrassed and ashamed of my actions in his case.”

“Take courage, my friend: Darius was a barbarian, a man without education. I realise that it was necessary to teach him a lesson, but you, who has glimpsed behind the veils of Isis, one of the greatest of all Greek philosophers, a man honouring education, surely you must be able to find *some* relief in your own convictions?” Hippocrates pressed.

“It helps but little when the actual moment comes,” I complained. “In my situation, it was just too much when Argus left in anger a few days after the burial, as if blaming me for his sister’s death. It makes the whole affair so heavy to bear... and then this whole state of our nation! I say to you: the sword of Damocles hangs above our beloved Greece. I feel its shadow every day. Socrates had warned about the decline already during the war in the Peloponnese. After the defeat in Sicily, Alcibiades even turned his back on Socrates, and as a result the kind philosopher was much depressed. Now that he has been summoned for trial, I fear for his life, despite of the assurance you have made about his wisdom and strength.”

“Where is your sister? Can she not be of help to you?” Hippocrates asked.

“She has left to Sicily. I wrote many times, but I have not got any word from her.”

“Be patient, my friend. She will come.”

“I think she doesn’t really care about me. And my views of women are very offensive to her. I wonder whether she can do anything good for me. Kundris was so much more understanding.”

### III

There was a little silence, my friend nodding all the time, turning my words in his mind. I sipped already from my third glass of wine, with hands trembling of anxiety, and with sudden resolution I shouted: “NO! I have grown weary of yielding to fate. I must set out to Delphi, and hear what

the Pythia prospects about the destiny of Greece, and humanity. In the worst case, I will endeavour to counter the strong procession of providence, little by little, such that a possible calamity can be averted... Maybe with your help?"

"I cannot partake in your efforts," said Hippocrates demurely. "I have made my oath to preserve life and will not diverge from my vocation. A long queue of sick awaits me in Kos. I have also many unpleasant matters to settle concerning the farmers who are claiming my land."

"We must analyse the situation, and make an ingenious plan. Surely, you can assist me with that?"

"I am faint at heart we will at all succeed. I wouldn't go against the Oracle of Apollo. You've seen that all the predictions on the victory of the Lacedaemonians came true."

"But we have an obligation to counter the forces of destruction... Maybe this Ring could be of help?"

"I would not count on that," said my friend slowly with a dark intonation in his voice. "Maybe you should plead with Momus. It can still be that Zeus, in answer to Mother Earth's prayer, yet designs to relieve her of an overpopulation of impious men, as first with the Theban War, and later by trimming down the human race with thunderbolts of fire and water floods, and when it was still not enough through the Trojan War. Do you not believe in destiny? We cannot escape it."

"Sure, but there has always been preserved a remnant of civilisation," I said. "Socrates has spoken about this with his friends and followers."

"Please recall the argument," Hippocrates urged, "for my memory of it is faint."

"It was stated that after the Great Deluge there survived small remnants of the human race: the shepherds, who lived scattered on the tops of mountains, who were unacquainted with those who lived the urban life, and ignorant of their ambition and avarice, and all the wrongs which they contrive against one another, much as is the situation in Athens now.

Despite the fact that all implements of civilisation perished, and every excellent invention of political, social, scientific and other sort of wisdom was obliterated at the time of the Great Deluge, only some two millennia have passed and a new state of civilisation has emerged, albeit a lesser one compared to ancient Egypt, but certainly greater in its Art and democratic rule than ever before.”

“Quite surely so,” my friend nodded.

“Why, my good Hippocrates, how is it then possible that civilisation has yet again reverted to a stage of utter degradation, and yet again is awaiting the Scorn of the Gods, as we Greeks would say, and which is nothing else than the restraining action of Nature.”

“I think I understand your point.”

“I have heard from Hermes III that deluges have occurred more than once.”

“The poets have written abundantly about it,” Hippocrates mumbled.

“Yes, but my Egyptian teacher told me things that didn’t by far correspond to the exalted lines of our poets. About the ancient Archons who lived millions of years ago he said, that they had grown too strong, such that Nature couldn’t restrain them anymore. Most of them were huge, ferocious beasts that had no more reason in them than the urge of predation and survival. Then the Titans, he said, were the first creatures endowed with divine reason, but they became proud and self-indulgent. Only a few survived the ordeal. Still, he confirmed the teachings of Socrates, who said that a small remnant of the Titan race was preserved that formed the seed for new civilisations, among others the Atlanteans, to whom for the first time the secret doctrines were unveiled. Unfortunately, they were also bestowed onto the unworthy, such that besides giants in knowledge also giants in evil were produced, who oppressed the whole continent. Thus, by the restraining action of nature their land sunk in the Northern Sea, and is now covered by ice. Then, in our part of the world, the Great Deluge came, but as time advanced, our race was able to restore

itself, and the world came to be what it is now: a different one from before the deluge, but in some aspects quite similar.”

“Yes, but Socrates’ argument was more about how this regeneration, and eventual degradation, took shape, wasn’t it so?” asked Hippocrates.

“Indeed, as he said, the change must have been very gradual, but it was much faster than the restorations that were needed after the destruction of the Titans. Socrates said that there were first small groups of shepherds, who were for some time quite isolated and they must have been very desirous of intercourse with their fellow men, because the limited means of travelling and the loss of the arts would initially have prevented cultural bloom. Material means would have been very scarce, and the art of metallurgy had been lost. All this revived slowly with time.”

“Surely, the desolation of these early and primitive men would create in them a feeling of affection and friendship towards one another, and there would hardly be any means or motive to fight for their subsistence, for they would have grazing land in abundance,” Hippocrates added.

“Indeed, as Hermes III, my teacher, stated, additional to the Support of Nature, as He created it, God has bestowed two gifts on Man in order to provide him with the necessities of life, so that when reduced to its last extremity, the human race may still grow and increase, and these are Solidarity and Inventiveness, the Reason of Heart and Head. Thus, earth brought forth Man as a fair gift, desiring to be mother not of plants without feeling, nor of brutes without reason, but of a moderated God-loving life. Therefore, we might say that in the early days after the Great Deluge mankind was not very poor in natural means, but material plenty there could not be, for there wasn’t any gold or silver. And a community that has neither poverty nor riches is, according to Socrates, always noble and just, and there hardly could have been the need for legislation, as they were generally living according to the custom and habit of their forebears. Logically, larger states sprang out of single, isolated habitations when civilisation proceeded, and patriarchal rule was established after the

maternal regime. People came together in greater numbers, and they increased the size of their cities, and took up agriculture. The city-state was formed, as we have seen first in Egypt, then in Babylonia, and now here in Greece and it blossomed steadily.”

“And which is now in bad decay, as you say, and civilisation is due to travel westward.”

“As all who have eyes to see, my noble Hippocrates! Thus, civilisations were expanding and growing physically closer together, and so the problem of conflict grew steadily. If the first works of defence were made to keep off wild beasts, the later ones were to function against intruding tribes or new civilisations.”

“Truly, bit by bit.”

“It is as Socrates said: *Everybody likes his own laws best, and the laws of others less well*, don’t you agree?”

“True, for those who don’t look further than their own nose.”

“Then we have finally arrived at the beginnings of legislation, and the legacy of Epimenides the Phaestian from Crete, our great prophet and reformer, in relation to it. When Solon sent for him, he was known to be the seventh wise in the state, and he served Solon in many ways. In problems of law and religion Epimenides prepared the way for a legislation based on moderation and new forms of worship, particularly abandoning barbarian ceremonies. His greatest achievement was the purification and blessing of Athens, by erection of sacred buildings and certain purifying ceremonies. The ‘cleansings’ made the Athenians more harmonious and obedient to justice.”

“Exactly! Although I should say that some of the writings of Epimenides are somewhat ironical. You have read his poem *Cretica*?”

“No, how does it run?” I asked.

“In it King Minos of Crete is made to say to Zeus: *‘They fashioned a tomb for thee, O Holy and High One - the Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies! But*

*thou will not die, thou livest and bearest forever, for in thee we live and move and have our being.’ ”*

“Where is the irony?”

“You don’t catch the logic riddle?”

“No? What do you mean?”

“King Minos, a Cretan himself, is made to say: *Cretans, always liars...*”

“Ah... I see, yes this cannot logically hold, of course.”

“Quite so, although - as an honest man from Kos - I can confirm that all Cretans are liars!” Hippocrates laughed. “But is the King allowed to mock the common man?”

“Yes, yes, I see your point,” I said. “This brings us also back to our argument on justice: Next we should ask what, on the individual level, does one do when somebody claims to say the truth and others say he is a liar, or when there is a paradox in a statement?”

“Obviously, then there is the need of an impartial arbiter, who will inspect the case and evidence must be found to substantiate the truth of the matter,” Hippocrates answered.

“Indeed, and how does this relate to the pursuit of truthfulness and justice in the city-state?” I asked, raising my finger, as I always did when Hippocrates was my youthful pupil.

“Laws must be set, by legislators and magistrates, appointed to frame an aristocracy, or monarchy, under which governance men will live, but these laws must logically apply also to themselves.”

“Quite so, Hippocrates, and do you not think that Pericles was skilled in this, and that this has been the basis of our Golden Age? He did not merely pursue a pure form of rule by law, but also forged more cohesion between the city-states of the Delian League.”

“He definitively was apt in social organisation,” Hippocrates confirmed, “and, above all, he adhered to Themis, who taught the necessity of respect of the citizen for its King, and the understanding of the King for the common good.”

“Yes, and I feel that most of his aristocratic notions were prompted by his eternal muse, Aspasia. Certainly, he rose to great esteem by restoring the Oracle at Delphi after this terrible earthquake, and, in the honour of Themis, installing Phocis as the new curator. The sacred oracles now have a great appeal to the Romans too: they crowd in great number the shrines of Apollo and Leto. As comes for the fate of Pericles, one cannot escape the impression that the position of power finally corrupted even him. This process of corruption is something we should inspect next.”

“Indeed, my friend, please proceed.”

“One thing is clearly to be questioned: is there such a thing as impartiality? I think there is not. Another thing that clearly lies at the foundation of corruption is the nature of men to become so quickly accommodated to superfluous material conditions. This is contrary to the workings of Nature who restrains herself, and casts off all superfluity.”

“This is very true, my friend, as you always say: *Nature restrains Nature*.”

“Truly, these were originally Hermes’ words, not mine, but as in our mythology we always exemplify the workings of Nature through the actions of the Gods, whose scorn we should better avoid.”

“As all wise men try to do,” said Hippocrates.

“As it is with the Syrian goddess Cybele, I can cite the corresponding words of my Egyptian master about Isis: that the clinging of the Sistrum will shake up all that is corrupted such that Nature will restore the order of things. In my argument I would like to raise the question of the use of currency. This is an old invention that has come down to us from the old Babylon, and I find it very disturbing that nowadays its corrupting power has become so evident. Already in Babylon we saw the first signs of its role to redirect the resources of the whole population for the benefit of only a few cruel rulers, and we saw this in Egypt too, leading to tremendous forms of slavery. The death toll in building the great pyramids was huge!”

“Have we not seen this also with Pericles and Phidias?” my friend asked.

“Not quite so comparable, and I lament their fate, Phidias to die in prison, and Pericles to die of the plague, both unable to defend themselves against the accusations. And whatever misuse Pericles and Phidias may have made of the funds of the state treasury, I should say that the works of art of the Acropolis, as I saw them on my last visit, were breath-taking. Phidias had given an intricate embodiment of the workings of Man against Nature in his sculptures, and I guess he had cast a lot of ideas from our precious poets and philosophers into solid form.”

“But does art, whatever greatness it may reach, sanction gross overspending of public funds?” asked Hippocrates.

“Maybe in this particular case it was allowable. But in general I would say that the use of money greatly undermines trust and impartiality. Maybe I should start with an example more close-by: wouldn’t you say that Laertes’ tavern is a bit expensive?”

“No, I would say it is reasonable. Twelve Drahma for such fare? Truly, in Kos it would cost double!”

“But if I may explain, what is money? Is currency not a means to interconvert the value of commodities, so that we can more easily exchange them?”

“Of course! It was, at least in the beginning, intended like this.”

“Yes, but then we invented loans and interest and the ruling class started raising taxes. Some time ago, I asked Laertes why his prices are always rising. He said the taxes on basic provisions like corn, milk, honey, and so on, had risen.”

“And, wasn’t he telling the truth?”

“Yes, but it was only half of the truth: the tax rise was only five in hundred, while he increased the price twelve in hundred... and what is more: I checked two months ago that the tax had come down again, but his prices stayed the same. When I asked him why his price level had not gone down with the taxes, he said that he always tries to get the best price under the ruling conditions, and that if the price was too low, he would



have more customers than he possibly could handle, and the quality of his food would suffer.”

“Oh, and you agree, and still go there?”

“Well, it has to be said that his dishes are still excellent, and I have more than enough money.”

“So, what is the problem?”

“I have the impression that Laertes was trying to shield himself from a painful question: that he had got used to having an increasing income, and could not adapt his expenses to accommodate a declining one, because he had already spent them beforehand in many loans. And he’s getting old, and cannot do as much as in the earlier days. He had a strange dream, by the way, which I found a bit frightening. We weren’t quite able to sort out what it meant.”

“Please, my friend, tell me. I’m all ear,” said Hippocrates, who was always particularly interested in dreams.

“Well, Laertes felt tired one day. He closed his tavern, and shortly after he fell asleep, somebody knocked on his front door. He opened, and saw one of his purveyors, named Erethsenos, with a worried face before him. He said: *‘Laertes, come and join me to see the olive pickers, they have all fallen asleep under their trees, and there are no olives to be got anywhere.’* So Laertes went with him to the countryside, and indeed he found all the olive farmers fast asleep. *‘What are we to do now?’* Laertes complained, because without the olive pickers they were out of business. So then they went to the landowner that rented their land to the olive farmers. However, they found he was not at home, and his wife informed them that he was in the senate for an emergency meeting. Thus Laertes and Erethsenos left for the senate too, to hear what was happening. When they arrived in the senate, there was a great dispute going on. It seemed that all farmers of the land had fallen asleep, not only the olive growers, but also the shepherds, the goat herds, the cattle men, and the crop growers, even the vineyards were unattended. The landowners guessed they had possibly drunk some

poisoned wine. The merchants said that they had been put under a spell by Ophion. The military men said the farmers were just lazy, and hardly did anything else than sleep anyway. The prefect looked severe. He said: *'If nobody can awake our farmers, then we should replace them as long as they are asleep; there is nothing else to be done.'* But that was easier said than done: the landowners complained that they had not grown crops for ages, also the merchants and innkeepers were not skilled in husbandry, not to speak of the military men. Again a dispute arose about the causes of the catastrophe. They all found it highly disturbing that exactly all the farmers were asleep, nearly a third of the population, and that there were too little people awake to teach the remaining citizens something of husbandry. In the end the inevitable decision was taken that the men next in line should occupy the fields, wine yards and orchards. The next men in line were the landowners, who had employed the farmers. This was a hard time for them, because they had to carry all their sleeping employees to their homes, where they were received by their spouses with great worry, and on top of it not even one of them was willing to teach them something about growing crops. There were, in the end, only a few that went out with them to give some rudimentary instruction. A few months went by, and the landowners, here and there assisted by soldiers, were sweating on the fields. One day, Erethsenos again called on Laertes, and he told that now the landowners were found slumbering on the fields, orchards and sheds. Also they had fallen asleep, and nobody could rouse them. Again there was an emergency meeting called at the senate. Yet again it was decided that the men next in line should occupy the fields. What else could be done? With now more than half of the nation asleep, it was now up to the purveyors and merchants to fulfil the task of growing the crops. One day an exhausted Erethsenos called on Laertes. He bade him to serve him dinner and a good glass of wine, and he said: *'Laertes, may the Gods be merciful. If I also fall asleep, you are the next in line to feed this unfortunate country.'*

After his copious dinner, Erethsenos was found fast asleep, and Laertes woke up bathing in sweat.”

“My dear Democritus,” Hippocrates teased, “Haven’t I always said that one shouldn’t underestimate the role of own land and some basic knowledge of husbandry?”

“This hardly applies to us, doesn’t it? I have been a cattle man, and you have an orchard yourself. Even Laertes has had a pig farm. So, I don’t quite understand what this dream means,” I commented.

“Truly, I must admit it doesn’t feel right.”

“I thought it has likely to do with money, as I tried to imply. The price of a commodity may become corrupted, if it is based on what the people are willing to pay for it. Thus, the price rises with the need, and with basic commodities like food and shelter, in unruly times, this seems unfair.”

“But my dear Democritus, this applies even more so to curing the sick. We hardly leave them in jeopardy, even if they have no money. Imagine how much I had to suffer from the great plague in Athens. I nearly went bankrupt. I can hardly increase my fees when the need increases.”

“But, my dear Hippocrates, how did you solve the problem?”

“I am forced to charge people according to their conscience, imploring them to leave in the silver bowl at the entrance an offering to Asclepius, so that when the patient comes to visit me next time, in His name, he may be cured again. Still I never look upon their donations, and the bowl is always copiously filled at the end of the day. Thus, in this way I have been able to live quite well.”

“An interesting way of payment of which, I hope, the God will not scorn you. Still, you agree that money can become a great source of inequity due to this human nature of insatiability. It makes people lazy too. They, as it were, fall asleep.”

“I surely do agree,” said Hippocrates.

“Of course, I have never had lack of money. Xerxes has bestowed enormous wealth on our family, and even my share of my father’s

inheritance is far more than a single person would ever need in daily life. I can even afford to buy gold, Arabian glassware, a still, an oven...”

“Ah! Your precious tools, I would like to see them!” Hippocrates said, but then he asked with a sly undertone: “Still, you had to put up quite a fight for your share with your brother Damasus, was it not?”

“Of course! Damasus’ argument that I was a philosopher, teaching humbleness and prudence, and thus not needing any oversized inheritances, was ridiculous!”

“Hmm. I would say he was rather *shrewd*, wouldn’t you say so?”

“Maybe, yes,” I sighed, “but this was for all a matter of equality of rights, and I had my travels and courses, a new school and my investigations to pay for. I have also been supporting Laertes generously by paying some off some of his debts, but...”

“Are you not reasoning in circles here?” asked Hippocrates with a few frowns in his forehead. “Of course I know what it is like,” he then beamed. “Lately my time has also been wasted in disputes over inheritances and division of land property.”

“Shame! But anyway my inheritance has given me the means to do more in alchemy than anybody else.”

“True!” Hippocrates enthused. “So, I hope to see your laboratorium!”

By then, our wine was finished, and I promised to show him my new instruments the following morning.

## 6. The Bowls of Gyges

~ Albedo ~

*And Gyges when he became ruler sent votive offerings to Delphi not a few, for of all the silver offerings at Delphi his are more in number than those of any other man; and besides the silver he offered a vast quantity of gold, and especially one offering which is more worthy of mention than the rest, namely six golden mixing bowls, which are dedicated there as his gift: of these the weight is thirty talents, and they stand in the treasury of the Corinthians...*

*Herodotus, The Histories*

### 1



he van made only slow progress on the muddy road in the moist, chilly weather of end February, a road leading to the little farming village of Dwindleford in the north of Yorkshire. The heating of the rented vehicle could only be put off or on, and the two ladies in the front cabin had to choose either to freeze or to sweat, and they decided for the latter. In the musty weather a small farm could be discerned, which corresponded to the description given at the Daleside Museum: a large barn with red roof tiles and arched Roman windows.

“What shall we say to this lady?” Dorothea asked.

“Whatever will guarantee success of our mission,” said Sheila.

They parked the car straight on the entrance road, and walked up to the house. Upon ringing a pre-historical door bell, the door was opened by a suspicious man with broad shoulders. “Ay, what’s up ladies?” he asked.

“We’ve come to see Margaret Denison, is she at home?” asked Sheila.

“My wife is just o’er to see the dentist, should have returned already; wha’s ye’re bus’ness then?”

“It concerns some museum stuff that needs to be returned to the rightful owner,” said Dorothea.

“Oh, and what may that be?”

“Six golden bowls,” said Sheila.

“We’ve got no golden bowls, who d’ye think we are? Rich ‘uns? We’re poor farmers we.”

“The matter really concerns your wife. I’m afraid,” said Sheila.

“Can we wait for her?” asked Dorothea.

“Suppose so; she should’ve been back already. Might make ye a cup ‘a tea,” the man said, seeing by now that the two ladies were on quite pertinent business.

“Much obliged,” said Sheila.

The ladies stepped into a long corridor, and hung their raincoats on the hall stand. Then they were shown into a large room, richly furnished, and with a large amount of family portraits on the wall. There was a very homely atmosphere, and it was quite a clean place for a farmhouse. It looked more like the residence of a baronet.

“I’ll be back soon,” said the man with a short bow. When the two women had seated themselves on the sofa, two large Alsatians came to greet them. From the kitchen some clinging sounds were heard, and in a short time the man came back with a large tray full of tea cups, a large tea pot, and even some butter scones.

“Here you are, ladies,” he said, “Margie will be coming in about fifteen minutes.” Then he disappeared.

“Uninformative, but quite a hospitable bloke in his own sort of way,” said Dorothea.

“Yes... well... farmers...” said Sheila, “Always busy. Still, it seems that Margaret Denison is a philosophy teacher at the local high school, in addition to being the curator of the Daleside Museum.”

They had been sipping tea and eating scones, when Sheila decided to have a look at the portraits. “I’ve definitely seen this picture somewhere,”

she said to Dorothea. She stood for a while looking at the portrait of a tall, feeble woman dressed in white with an ochre shawl and a beige hat in her right hand, painted against a dark blue sky in front of a chalk cliff at the seashore. She had been painted with a slightly too small head, and her slightly melancholic gaze Sheila somehow recognised. Still there were no nameplates or other indications to throw light on who she was.

Suddenly they heard a car entering the yard. Dorothea peeped out of the window. "There she is," she said. "She is talking to her husband."

"Hope she doesn't slip away," said Sheila.

"I don't think so, she is coming in."

Within a minute the door opened and a tall, sprightly looking lady stepped into the drawing room. "Hello, you are here to see *me*!?"

"If you are Margaret Denison?" Sheila queried.

"Yes, yes, and you are here on museum business!?" she asked in a loud voice.

"Yes, that's true," said Sheila.

"My husband just told me. Unfortunately, it is closed today."

"Yes, we noticed. We were actually trying to retrieve some artefacts your museum has lent from the Ashmolean museum in Oxford."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, according to our files, you should be in the possession of six golden bowls of ancient Greece."

"Ah... I take it you refer to these *brass* dishes?"

"I don't know what you have been told, but they are made from solid gold," said Sheila.

"Gold? Didn't quite look like gold," the lady said.

"I suppose you still have them at the museum?"

"Hmm. They are actually here. They aren't really so show-worthy, and they don't belong to the museum at all," the lady said.

"You have them *here*... in your *own* house?" Sheila asked.

"Uhm... well... to be honest... I gave them more serviceable use."

“Oh... and where might that be?” Sheila asked.

“In the pig sty.”

“The PIG STY!?” Sheila exclaimed.

“Indeed! I have the ambition to keep up the most luxurious pig sty in the world, equipped with all kinds of fancy stuff. Collected gadgets I found here and there, and these dishes, well... they came out quite handy,” she said. “Do you really believe they are made of *gold*?”

“Yes, and we need them, if possible today. We have a letter from the Ashmolean museum, which entitles us to retrieve them on their behalf, and return them.”

“Oh? How odd... and where are they going to?”

“Back to Greece.”

“Well, I say, are they after the Greek crisis possibly also going to return the Elgin Marbles?” Margaret giggled nervously. “Do you have this paper with you? I mean, from the Ashmolean Museum?”

“Yes, here it is,” said Sheila fishing a small form out of a pocket of her trousers.

“How awfully strange! I even didn’t know they were from the Ashmolean, but according to those pictures they seem to be right ones... yes... that seems to be in order. Indeed it reads here they are made of gold. Good heavens, imagine, John, our pigs have been served their grub from golden dishes all those years!”

“So it seems to be!” John laughed. “What were they used for, if I may ask?”

“They were used as offering bowls for the people who consulted the Oracle at Delphi.”

The lady suddenly looked bewildered, and stammered: “Offering bowls, for the votive offerings at Delphi?” She stared in disbelief, but then she somehow relented, and said: “Yes, well, there are some Greek markings on them. So you may be right. There are two problems though.”

“And what are they?” asked Sheila.



“Well, they are cemented quite tightly into the feeding troughs, you see. Quite difficult to get them out, without damage. And they are frightfully heavy, about eighty kilograms each.”

“So large? You can better show us,” said Sheila.

They stepped out of the house, and in the low, blinding sunlight set course for the barn. After crossing the yard, they all stepped inside, and for Sheila and Dorothea it was instantly clear that this was no ordinary pig sty.

“We have a biodynamic farm, and pigs ourselves,” said Sheila, “but this beats even our premises.” There was a huge space, in which some twenty hogs were sniffing in separate enclosures, six in number, and each had a large, round feeding trough in which a bottom of gleaming gold was observed, although it had clearly more the shade of brass.

“This is a little problem now,” said the landlady.

“These have to be removed carefully,” said Sheila. “We are dealing here with an ancient treasure.”

“Should have been a bit more on my guard with these treasures, but how are we to get them off safely?” said Margaret.

“Does your husband have a hammer and chisel around?” asked Dorothea.

“I suppose these can be found, yes,” said John, standing a bit in the back, “but this is going to take a few hours of careful work, I fear.”

John had fetched the tools and he himself set out to remove the dishes with particular care. In the end they seemed to be still in rather good condition, despite their use as feeding troughs for their pigs, for some obscure reason, and already for many years. Truly, the surface was impeccably clean.

“Always a bit wondered what those dishes were from,” John said. “We all believed they were made of brass. I think we will get ‘um out neatly.” He was working for a few hours on it, and one by one the heavy, shallow dishes were retrieved, and loaded into the van with the help of Sheila and

Dorothea. The total of nearly five hundred kilograms was about the maximum the rented lorry could carry.

“Well, that calls for a celebration,” Margaret jested, when they were finished with the lengthy operation.

## 2

It became soon clear that Margaret was very anxious to hear more about the golden dishes, because she felt somewhat embarrassed of having harboured such a great treasure all these years, and thus tried to defend herself in a dignified way by proposing that the ladies would stay for dinner. Dorothea and Sheila both had the feeling they could glean a bit more from Margaret too, but they needed to be careful not to tell too much of the details of their quest. During an improvised, but rather rich dinner, Sheila diverted the conversation in a new direction for a while. “Have you collected all this precious stuff in this farmhouse yourself?” she asked.

“Yes, I got most of it from the second-hand shops,” Margaret replied.

“I don’t know, but...” Sheila turned round and pointed towards the portrait of the comely lady in the white dress, “I have seen this portrait somewhere. You know who she is?”

“No idea! I bought it from an antiquarian in Oxford a few years ago.”

“I think it is Lady Maria Oglander-Fitzroy,” said Sheila.

“Oh... really? And who was she?” Margaret said.

“She was a rather important person in her time, and if I remember correctly, it was hanging in Nunwell House on the Isle of Wight,” Sheila said.

“So, you have been there?”

“Yes, in the time Nunwell house was still was a museum. There is something of a ghost story about it. I don’t personally believe them, but Lady Maria, who I believe is the figure portrayed here, was in her time

lady-in-waiting to Princess Charlotte, and had she not faced an untimely death, she might have even inherited the throne.”

“Are you sure?” asked Margaret. “So this may actually be a somewhat *precious* picture... Hmm... interesting. I got it for only a hundred pounds, just before the inflation set in.”

“Do you still have the receipt?”

“Oh yes, sure!” said Margaret.

“The name plate has been clearly removed. This picture strangely disappeared when Nunwell House was set on fire. Luckily they had been able to extinguish the fire, and there was little damage in the end, but the famous picture of Lady Maria was gone.”

“Well, the surprises never end... So it should be returned, I guess?”

“Yes, I would certainly consider returning it to the rightful owner. I suppose you could get some of your money back, if you still have that receipt, and if the Oxford antiquarian is still in business.”

“How awfully embarrassing! You might almost think I’m some sort of looter of precious Art after all this. I’ll be on the phone about this painting, for sure. If needed, I will *fly* that tradesman, and he will not be in business much longer. So... this Lady Maria was featuring in a ghost story?”

“Yes, actually, she died after a few years of marriage, which caused a national wave of grief, because she was very popular among the people, a bit like princess Diana in our time. However, she *did* give birth to a child, shortly before her death, and this child, called Charlotte, or *Little Missy*, lived very long at Nunwell. However, she was a depraved child, and it is speculated that she is spooking around the premises,” said Sheila.

“Good Lord! Well, that is an interesting historical perspective,” said Margaret, but then she returned to the subject of the golden bowls. “May I ask how you ever found out they are *here*, these dishes?”

“My husband discovered that there was a notice in the Ashmolean Museum, that these dishes were on loan in your museum,” Sheila

explained. “They were catalogued as “*Six golden Bowls from the excavation site at Delphi, obtained from the dowry of Lady Mary Mainwaring.*”

“But that is very strange, because I got them many years ago from one of my former students. He wanted me to preserve them for him, and he said he would one day collect them again.”

“So you didn’t lend them *yourself*?”

“No, no. They were *brought* here.”

“By whom?” asked Sheila.

“Andrew Tielock, a friend from my Glasgow years.”

“Ah!” Sheila exclaimed. “We are familiar with that guy! Your former *student* and a *friend* you say he was?”

“Yes, I gave lectures in philosophy at Glasgow University for the first year students. I was still young and pretty, and he was only a bit younger. Something bloomed for a short while. I think we dated each other for maybe a year, but then we decided to remain just friends. Later I moved up here and got this museum job, and one day he appeared on my doorstep with all those heavy dishes.”

“My father used to know Andrew Tielock, and he called him Andy. That was in the time he was living in Lockerbie.”

“Yes, indeed, I can confirm that he moved there, but then he moved on to Madeira. I regularly got postcards from him. You see, he really wanted to have his own winery, and that was what he finally got in Madeira.”

“So you have heard of the Purple Rose sparkling wine too?!”

“Yes, yes, he actually visited me a few times and brought many bottles with him, but then suddenly - I think it was in 2005 - I didn’t hear of him any longer. A year passed by and then I heard from somebody that he had died. Some person with a Greek name informed me that he had died.”

Sheila realised now that she was getting a foothold on a lost trail. “Why did Andy bring these bowls to you?”

“He bid me to keep them safe in an unobtrusive way, such that they could be retrieved later. He said he would need them after a few years,

because he would be moving. After I heard he had died, I decided to keep the dishes, and use them in the pig sty. They took quite a lot of space, and in the end it was just the best practical solution.”

“Well, well, well,” said Sheila. “To the Ashmolean museum he proposes that they might be lent to a country museum, in the expectation that the Oxford museum would forget all about them, and at the same time he brings them to you, claiming them to be his own possessions, and not really so valuable. Clever guy!”

“I have always known him as a reliable person.”

“He might have been in *your* time, but I know him to be a schemer. To obtain his goals he wasn’t afraid of burglaries.”

“How did you meet Andy then?” Margaret asked.

“When he was trying to steal a book from my father’s library,” said Sheila.

“O dear, oh dear, oh dear!” Margaret sighed.

## 7.

# The Road to Damascus

❧ *Sublatio* ❧

*Everything to come was already in images: to find their soul, the ancients went into the desert. This is an image. The ancients lived their symbols, since the world had not yet become real for them. Thus they went into the solitude of the desert to teach us that the place of the soul is a lonely desert. There they found the abundance of visions, the fruits of the desert, the wondrous flowers of the soul. Think diligently about the images that the ancients have left behind. They show the way of what is to come. Look back at the collapse of empires, of growth and death, of the desert and the monasteries: they are the images of what is to come. Everything has been foretold. But who knows how to interpret it?*

C. G. Jung  
*The Red Book*

### 1



he spring of 2016 entered with force. After a two year's disintegration process, the ruinous wave of hooliganism in the larger cities of Europe had subsided and the political climate was after a long time markedly improving. In the beginning of April, six persons gathered at Bristol harbour. Already in the early morning they had carried all their travelling stuff on board the schooner *Emily*, and had some trouble getting all these heavy golden bowls safely stowed away in the hull. They were all sweating and decided sit for while outside a cosy restaurant for a last mainland breakfast and coffee, before the long voyage that would bring the party southwards to Madeira. Richard McGregor was listening to the weather forecast on the radio, and informed that the long period of calm, warm weather would continue. Michael Willmore was studying the route and planning where they would anchor for the first night. They

might just be able to reach Barnstable in the evening, he estimated from the data he got from Richard. The next stop was almost certainly going to be the Isles of Scilly. The start was a highly familiar route, and after this they would be a week on sea to reach La Coruna in Spain, before the long passage to Funchal, a trip the Willmore family had made only once in the past with the *Emily*. Gillian was discussing with Sheila and Dorothea how to avoid seasickness, because the women all lacked sea legs, and for Dorothea it was even her very first ocean trip on such a large vessel.

“How long will it last, Michael, before we reach Funchal?” she asked.

“With a wee bit of luck two weeks, but if the wind turns from northwest to southwest it will take somewhat longer, maybe three weeks,” said Michael. “Better think of it as a long holyday and try to find a *modus vivendi* as long as we are at sea. Better not have any predetermined program, and try for all to be useful on board. Are we all ready now? Shall we hoist the anchor?”

“Yes, let’s get on with it,” said Pierce.

They had all finished breakfast and marched in line towards the old, well-varnished wooden vessel. Within a few minutes they were moving on the engine into the Bristol Channel. The sails were soon drawn up, and a small breeze from the Northwest produced a slight tilt, but all enjoyed the sun and the scenery and the steady speed. Sheila settled with the ladies on one side chatting and laughing. She recalled many funny things they had experienced on their earlier trips in this direction. Michael was proudly standing at the helm, looking down at the happy gathering, while Richard and Pierce were discussing somewhere inside. As yet, Michael didn’t bother too much about making plans for duties and shifts, but he realised that once they were at open sea some order would have to be imposed, stressing his role as captain.

Barnstable was reached in time before dark, and the ladies fancied to go shopping in town. The three men withdrew in the large saloon on the

main deck, and had found two precious bottles of Chablis to divide, from the year 1985.

Pierce was still having his doubts about the whole expedition. “Blast, Michael, I have to say that this is the rarest adventure I’ve ever been in, and the risks we are taking are *huge!* Just suppose we are caught with all these treasures in the Mediterranean by some of these Libyan pirates! Everything will be lost.”

“We aren’t even armed,” said Richard.

“I’ve made a few precautions. We likely will get escort from the Navy from Gibraltar. In Greece and Damascus all the officials are fully informed. Carrying arms would be completely against the purport of our journey anyway. We have just to rely on the generosity of Heaven to give us fair weather, and those other lucky strokes of fate we all need.”

It was soon getting late and the men were getting ready to tuck themselves in for the night, when the ladies came back from town with all kinds of delicacies. Michael commented: “If you don’t want to get seasick, you should avoid all those dainties; this French brie is not really the thing to eat at sea.”

“OK, captain,” Dorothea said with a slight tone of defiance.

“Please remember that I am, indeed, the captain of this vessel and you’d better comply with the small number of directives I give, otherwise things may turn out awkwardly. Better buy some stomach stabilizers in St. Mary’s before we are on the open sea, because that is really rough, even in fair weather.”

“Hmm, and what would those stabilisers be?” Dorothea asked.

“Pea soup, rye bread, sausage, dark beer....” Michael said, then blinking an eye: “Some Metaxa or rum, perhaps, against worms.”

“Hah, hah, hah! How funny,” said Dorothea.

“This means we’ll be eating all those delicacies tonight, and we have saved one bottle of exquisite wine for you ladies to go with it,” said Pierce.



Thus, the long passage on the Atlantic southwards started happily. As it turned out, the whole trip to Spain was made in just five days. After anchoring at La Coruna, the whole crew took a short rest, and went off in town to see the sights and have a proper mainland dinner. In the late evening they all returned from town with bags of provisions for the next leap to Funchal, and gathered on the beach looking at the sunset.

"They have recovered already quite well from the recession, these Spaniards," said Richard. "The shops are full again, and now I am stuck with a pocket full of Pesetas."

"I'm afraid conditions on Madeira are less good. The rich have largely moved out after the great recession, and they haven't returned yet," said Sheila. "A lot of poverty has returned, and mainland Portugal is still in big trouble."

The little gathering at the beach at La Coruna came soon to an end. The Emily was waiting for the crossing of the Atlantic all the way to Madeira, and they steered into the dark southwest; their quest had started in earnest.

After a week of sailing in clear, steady weather, the Emily arrived at Funchal harbour, and they were all cordially received in the late afternoon at the splendid Tilloch mansion at the Ponta da Cruz. Maria gave the party a warm welcome and they all drifted into the living room, except Richard.

Marco stepped out of the kitchen and said: "So, it seems you have made it all quite in time. You must have had quite splendid weather."

"Yes, indeed, Marco," said Michael. "It was in the end a piece of cake. So now have some extra time to stay, before our journey to the Mediterranean."

"I would like to see the house," said Dorothea, "I have heard so much about it from Sheila during the trip. Particularly the wine cellar, but what lies *beyond* I'd rather skip."

"I suppose Richard at least would like to see our little museum of ancient art," said Maria. "Where is the illustrious Richard McGregor?"

“Here I am!” said Richard, stepping inside the living room. “I was just admiring the staircase; that is a rare treasure!”

“Indeed... Well... after we have moved all the antiquities out of this house, we’ll be happy to sell the place,” said Maria, who disappeared into the kitchen.

“Already found another residence?” asked Sheila, stepping in the direction of the kitchen.

“Yes, a small villa on the North side near Faial, in the mountains. The scenery is superb,” Maria said proudly.

They all sat down and expelled three black-and-white cats from the settee. Maria carried a large tray inside with coffee, tea and biscuits. “This is all I have for now, but dinner will be ready when Benji arrives,” she said.

“Benji? You mean Benjamin Miller?” asked Richard.

Maria confirmed that inspector Miller was expected to show up and join the party later in the evening.

“This is all very disturbing, Sheila,” said Richard. “What does this pompous police officer have to do with our quest?”

“He has many useful connections. For one, he knows King Hamid quite well.”

“King *who*?” asked Maria.

“The new King of Phrygia,” said Michael.

“Phrygia? Must I believe there is still a Kingdom of Phrygia?” Maria wondered.

“Indeed, somewhere in the middle of Turkey, a very small, independent province, and an extremely rich one, if I must believe the newspapers.”

“I have heard of this kingdom from one of my gaol mates,” said Richard. “It’s a very small independent state in Turkey close to Ankara. The capitol is Gordianum. There are about fifty thousand inhabitants. The standard of living is so high there that democracy is almost pointless, and the royal house is the oldest in the world, dating back all the way to King Midas.”

“Maybe you can accompany Benji to Phrygia,” said Michael.

“Is it not a bit awkward to meet the King of Phrygia in the presence of my antagonist?” Richard protested. “And what the hell for?”

“To induce His Royal Highness to lend his golden throne for a while to Delphi.”

Richard was left standing in a perplexed state of mind. “Whatever makes you think he will yield?”

Michael interrupted him saying: “Patience, Richard, let’s hear Benji first.”

“Maybe we can all go out into the garden for a while, so that Marco can concentrate on his cookery in all peace and quiet,” said Maria. She opened the slide window, and stepped outside into the garden. Michael soon joined Maria in the direction of the shore line, while the others were setting course for the Rose Tree.

“Quite a sight you are giving up. Is the scenery in Faial so much better?” Michael asked.

“I need a change of scenery. It seems you are all in earnest to revive the legendary Oracle of Delphi, I’m still wondering who is going to be the Pythia,” said Maria.

“We have no idea. But I had the idea it might be you.”

“*ME?* Becoming a prophetess? Are you *crazy?*” Maria cried.

“It is, of course, a very great honour, which you should willingly accept... when it is decided so,” said Michael.

Maria stared at the horizon. She asked: “But why *me?*”

“Sorry, but you seem to be the only person among us who is eligible for the position.”

“What is so special about me then?” asked Maria.

“There are various reasons, the main one being that you seem to be from a certain family, and that you are still a virgin,” Michael explained.

Maria looked slightly baffled. “But Michael, where did you get this strange idea?”

“An educated guess.”

“Well, I say! You’re *far* off... Sheila has kept our secret a little bit too well, it seems.”

“Some secrets are not worth keeping. I think that you at least keep men at a safe distance,” said Michael.

“Oh, quite untrue! When I got married with Jorge life went well enough. It only didn’t last very long, and becoming pregnant at 44 was a bit of a surprise.”

“Pregnant? You had a child?!” Michael exclaimed.

“Yes, but I lost it. I slipped on those damned mahogany stairs, and had a miscarriage.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry... Does Marco know?”

“No, I don’t think I’ll put up the subject with him unless it becomes necessary.”

“And why could it become necessary?”

“Forged hospital papers... that there was no pregnancy.”

“Your relation with Marco is OK then?”

“Sure, with Marco and me things are fine,” she said, looking at Michael inquiringly.

“Hmm, I see. Has it something to do with *Catholicism* then? You feel guilty?”

“No, I’ve had my doubts about Catholicism, but after my pregnancy have become more understanding. Indeed, becoming a Pagan prophetess is quite a swing to the other extreme, I would say.” Then she uttered a little nervous laugh. “Hah! Basilio at least had guessed it all right! He called me a *Pagan Witch* more than once!”

“Well, there you are then!” said Michael.

“I dare say, it isn’t quite what I had in mind for my new career. I was more thinking of a tourist office. I don’t even know any *Greek*!”

“Well, let’s see what happens. There are still so many matters to be cleared up.”

“I have done some reading on the Pythia, you know,” said Maria. “After our discussions in Glasgow, I was remembered of a strange fact. You see, the Pythia doesn’t have to be a virgin, but she should be a respectable woman, and – what is more – she has to be from Delphi.”

“By *birth* you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Well, there goes my flimsy idea,” Michel sighed.

“On the contrary! I have studied on all the sources, and I’ve noticed that I’m probably the only person in the world eligible for the role of the Pythia.”

“Really? Do you mean to say you were *born* in Delphi?”

“I was! In fact, I was born by accident on the temple site itself.”

“*Blimey!*” Michael exclaimed.

“I would appreciate it if you wouldn’t hoot this around, Michael,” Maria said.

“How did this all come about? Officially you were born in Birmingham,” said Michael.

“My mother, when she noticed that she was pregnant, decided to escape to Greece for the period of the waiting. She lived for eight months in Itea. I suppose she tried to avoid gossip and shame. Anyway, quite at the end of her period she went on a tour to Delphi to see the sights with two of her friends, who acted as chaperones. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of May, in the heat of the day, she slipped and fell on one of those stairs, not badly, but enough to set her off in labour. She was quite courageous and with a little help of her two travel companions I was brought into the world in no time. ‘*A piece of cake!*’, mom said.”

“Born on the temple site itself...” Michael mumbled. “Almost looks as if we are caught up in a...”

“A conspiracy, you mean? Apart from the people who were assisting at the time in Delphi, nobody really knows I was born in Greece; back here

only I and my mother knew. She somehow had managed to cover up the whole fact rather cleverly, because no person has ever raised the issue.”

“Did she forge the birth registers?”

“Evidently, but I don’t know how.”

“A bit strange though. Goes off to Greece to avoid a scandal, and then forges the birth registers to show you were born in England more than a week later. What are we to think about that?”

“Surely makes one wonder about the machinations of destiny,” said Maria. “I was less lucky with *my* child.”

“Indeed. It makes one wonder, doesn’t it?”

“The miscarriage I discussed in detail with Sheila. She could have told you. I didn’t mean her to be so secretive towards you.”

“That’s OK, Maria. It seems you have had your stroke of destiny. And now due to your ailments you even have to give up your music.”

“Oh, but I’ve got a new medication and a diet, and it helped a great deal. I have recently been playing again and have given piano lessons too.”

“Oh, but that is magnificent!” said Michael.

“I’m studying on some very nice new stuff. Ever heard of Déodat de Séverac?”

“No, can’t say I have.”

“Well, that’s going to be on my programme, and then I’m thinking opening a tourist office again, as I said.”

“Why a tourist office? Maybe you should consider organising conferences again.”

“Another possible option, certainly,” said Maria.

They continued their stroll in the garden silently. Soon they joined the others. The *Rose Tree* was blossoming early, and the roses – in three colours – reached till the roof of the mansion. They all wandered around and watched the sunset in the many shades of red above the blue Atlantic. Maria then showed the curious cellar to Pierce, Gillian and Richard. Dorothea didn’t want to see this museum of Hermetic art, for reasons of

her Christian conviction. Richard guessed she was rather afraid, or at least uneasy, to be confronted with the possible remains of a Titan, a Half-Goddess, or whatever those twins had been sixty millennia ago. Nevertheless, his own stomach was turning when he beheld the two dark-tanned faces of the mummy of Mnemosyne, and all the strange objects in the trunk, not to speak of the smell. The *Cross of Sharon*, on the other hand, was very impressive, and everybody felt proud that after three centuries they were in the position to return it to its original location in Damascus. Still, some fear they all felt creeping up when they started contemplating how all these priceless treasures could be safely transported to the unruly Middle-East, and then with such an old wooden sailing boat.

Then the doorbell rang: Benjamin Miller had arrived, the last guest to join the party, and it signalled that time had arrived for dinner. The retired superintendent was in many ways the same as ten years before. The only difference was that he was now well-tanned, and had lost weight considerably.

“Well, well, if it is not the famous Mister Digby, my old customer,” Benji cheered jovially. “Now that you have sat out your days in Onley, I suppose you are fully redeemed?”

“You don’t have to make folly of that matter, Sir,” said Richard. “By the way, my name is Richard McGregor, and we are not quite ready with *you* yet.”

“Oh dear! Am I in for trouble?” Benji asked, looking at Maria.

“I don’t know, Benji, it seems the Willmores have some plans of recruiting you for our quest, and that *could* mean trouble,” she said. “But let’s have some dinner first. They’ll not disturb you right away with unnerving plans.”

“Ah! Has Marco been cooking?” Benji asked. He was in a very good mood, and still completely unaware that he would be drawn up in an adventure that would make an abrupt end to his golden pension days.

“Just Paella,” said Maria.

They all sat down in the garden at a large table, and had an animated dinner, during which all realised that the term *just Paella* was a gross understatement. Soon the subject embarked on jolly old England.

“Not that things are so good here on Madeira, but I heard that it has been quite restless in the UK now too,” said Benji.

“Glasgow at least was a *terrible* mess last winter!” said Richard.

“Yes, and Birmingham, and Manchester, and Liverpool,” Sheila added. “Now it is all suddenly quiet, and it seems that people are actually returning to work after our Prime Minister said that the Government cannot really do ALL the work, while the rest of the population is either at strike or destroying more rapidly the things they are trying to restore.”

“I heard that speech, yes,” said Benji. “I already thought that it would have effect and that they likely didn’t have to resort to Army intervention.”

“Indeed, but now things are so quiet that it is almost a bit sinister, as if everything is in anticipation of something,” said Michael.

“Truly, after the peace in Syria there are no wars raging anywhere. That is a very rare condition,” Pierce added.

“You mean the world is *awaiting* the Oracle?” asked Maria.

“Difficult to say,” said Sheila, “Nobody knows about it yet.”

“What are you saying?” asked Benji “Are you all brooding on some secret plot?”

“Indeed Benji,” said Sheila. “Ever heard of the Oracle of Delphi?”

“Yes, yes, I read they are restoring it... for the tourists, of course,” Benji replied. “Looks splendid.”

“In fact, it might be restored also in earnest,” said Sheila.

“You mean... also the *prophesies*?”

“Yes,” Sheila nodded.

Benji thought of making a little joke, but seeing that everybody was looking very solemnly in his direction, he asked: “Uhm... Would that not need the complete revival of the Greek Pagan *religion*? Who on Earth is going to do *that*?”



“*WE* are, Benji,” said Maria.

Benji’s eyes nearly popped out, and his spoon fell in his desert. “Who’s *WE*?”

“All nine at this table, you included,” said Sheila.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t follow. How can I ever be involved in this?”

“We need you to persuade King Hamid of Phrygia to lend us his throne,” said Sheila.

“His throne? Why me?”

“You know him personally, don’t you?”

“Yes, but he is a rather stubborn guy, and I cannot really persuade him in such matters. Why is that throne so important?”

“It is the original throne that Midas donated to the holy shrine of Delphi. It served as the seat of the interpreter, and we need to lend it, at least for a limited time.”

“No way!” said Benji. “He will not part from that! It has been his Royal heritage.”

“That’s why we need *you* to persuade him,” said Michael.

“Why do you think he will listen to me? We are not on so good terms as you think. Actually we had a bit of a fall-out a few years ago. Haven’t seen him for a while, and now that he has become King...”

“About what did you have a fall-out, Benji?” asked Michael.

“An arms deal,” said Benji. “It was secret, so I’ll not say anything about it. In fact, I already said too much.”

Suddenly, Richard had a flash of an idea, realizing he had a small trump card in his sleeve. He said: “Well, in case he is reluctant, I can be of assistance. I propose I go there together with Benji.”

“Good idea,” said Michael.

“You mean that I go on an audience together with an *ex-convict*?” Benji exclaimed.

Nobody ventured to further ask what the ‘ex-convict’ had in mind, and they all enjoyed Marco’s fine mango desert.

The stay in Funchal was the following week completely dominated by the great shipping operation. Bit by bit, the valuable, ancient artefacts of the former Tilloch mansion were transferred to the schooner Emily in the harbour of Funchal. The greatest effort was to move the triangular altar, the heaviest and also the most fragile object. Finally, Mnemosyne in the huge wooden sarcophagus and the Cross of Sharon were carried out via the wine cellar in the middle of the night into the lorry, and inconspicuously conveyed to the harbour.

## 2

Everything had been made ready for the great passage to Greece and Syria. Already at the end of April the ancient schooner arrived at Gibraltar, and then continued to Greece under the escort of two British frigates, because the Mediterranean was crammed with boats full of refugees and pirates. Three days later the small port of Itea was reached. There all the artefacts that had a possible function in Delphi were handed over to the Greek authorities to be further installed in the ancient and now nearly fully restored temple complex.

The party, however, did not tarry. Richard and Benji travelled on to Athens and both men proceeded from there by plane to Gordianum, the capital of Phrygia. Gillian and Dorothea were both of the opinion that they had done enough for the cause which they deemed rather dubious. As they were, indeed, both devout Christians, they cherished the opinion that the redeemer had made all these earlier forms of worship quite obsolete.

However, Pierce, Maria, Marco, Michael and Sheila proceeded without delay towards the Lebanon, being escorted now by only one British frigate. Arrival at the port of Beirut was three days later, and the large crate with the golden cross and the sistrum was put on a British military lorry. Two more trucks were put at the disposal of the illustrious party, accepting to take some human aid supplies to the refugee camp at Al'Sabboura. At this

point their precious schooner was left in the harbour of Beirut under British supervision.

Starting off early in the morning, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May, the three British army trucks encountered no obstacles in crossing the border into Syria, as they were carrying a military clearance. Surprisingly, the emblem of the METFOR, which stood for the *Middle-East Task Force*, was that of two crossed double-bladed axes, and Michael wondered from where this sign could have been derived.

The trip from Beirut to Damascus was about 120 kilometres by road, and they could make it easily before noon. Michael had the idea of calling on his old colleague, Eric Simmons, to have luncheon at his famous restaurant complex. It was conveniently situated on the road to Damascus, and quite near the small village called Al'Sabboura, where the Red Cross had erected the largest refugee camp in Syria.

On the little sojourn through the Syrian wasteland they would be altogether without safe convoy, but they were all convinced that the METFOR emblem on their trucks would provide ample cover. After a few hours of driving through an extremely hot desert, they came to the village of Zabadani, and before they would cross the mountains there was a nice view of lake Zarzar. It was at this point that they saw a person on the road, beckoning them to stop. Pierce hailed him saying: "Hullo!"

"You are METFOR people?" the man asked.

"Well, more a simple Englishman stranded in the desert," Pierce jested.

The fierce, tanned man approached Pierce and Michael and said: "Shiman is my name. I am on the way to Damascus with my family." He evidently knew his English very well, even some sort of Oxford accent Michael made out. The man reached out his hand, and they shook hands politely.

Michael asked: "Must I assume you are refugees from the Lebanon, and marooned in the desert?"

"Indeed, and I suppose you are on METFOR business," Shiman asked.

“Yes, I’m Michael Willmore, and we are carrying aid supplies to the Al’Sabboura refugee camp. With how many are you?”

“I’m travelling with my wife and children and the family of my brother Dharman, thirteen in all, four adults and nine children.”

At this point Sheila, Maria and Marco had approached, and Sheila asked: “How are you all thinking of getting to Damascus all on foot?”

“We have a tent and sufficient supplies, but the road is long for walking, and we could use some transportation.”

“We will have to discuss,” said Pierce.

“We are behind that little hill over there,” said Shiman, gesticulating in the direction of the lake, slightly down the road from where he had emerged, and then he already walked back.

Marco had stepped out of his truck and discussed with Michael and Pierce. Maria also appeared behind him. “I wouldn’t mix with refugees, if I were you,” Marco whispered. “We are carrying precious stuff.”

“Indeed,” said Maria, “much too risky.”

“I suppose we can just take them as far as Al-Sabboura,” Pierce proposed. “It’s not so far.”

“I will go with Pierce to see where they are, and we’ll be straight back,” said Michael.

Thus Michael and Pierce went wandering off to the nearby hill to see where the refugees were camped. When they had scaled the top of the hill, they could catch a glimpse of the famous lake again, and then they noticed two large tents down the slope. They descended down the other side of the hill to greet the people who were living in this desolated, sun-burnt country. A man near one of the tents turned round when he heard people approaching. “Ah, hello, I am Dharman. My brother said you might be coming. Are you only with the two of you?”

“Yes,” said Pierce, “We cannot leave these trucks unguarded on the road. If you want to come we have to leave now. We can bring you as far as Al’Sabboura.”

“Fine with us,” said Dharman.

“You have been living here long, in this desert?” asked Michael.

“Only two days in this place,” Dharman replied.

“Have you been long away from Syria?” asked Pierce.

“Four years. We are originally from Aleppo, and fled to Lebanon when the town had been under fire in 2012. Just a month ago, when the UN forces arrived, we were kicked by the Lebanese back into Syria.”

“Well, most of the refugees from Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan have now returned to Syria, and the METFOR is seeing to their well-being, so I believe you should be safe again here.”

“At least we hope to get some justice and protection now,” said Dharman.

“Well,” sighed Michael, “the Al’Sabboura camp should be OK, but they are also watchful for perpetrators in the refugee camps.”

“That is of no concern to us,” said Shiman, who had approached silently from behind. “In the end we would like to return to Aleppo. I’m confident that in the end all should work out well. What kind of stuff are you carrying?” Shiman then asked.

“Some human aid supplies, but what exactly I don’t know,” said Michael. After some discussion about how they would get going, it was agreed how nine adults and nine children would be fitted into the three army trucks with all their belongings. Without further delay they set out seemingly without any complications. After a short while they made an unscheduled stop at a water fun park, with the inviting name “*SPLASH*”. A fresh-up was a welcome interruption of the day, which undoubtedly was going to be even hotter. Pierce and Michael, however, decided to keep watch over the vans. Dharman had gone for a stroll and in the end it was only Marco who was entering the water park with the women and the children.

An hour later, Michael and Pierce found Shiman nosing around in the truck that carried the *Cross of Sharon*. Before this, Shiman had already

managed to open a crate in another lorry, where he had found a large stowage of half-automatic fire arms of Israeli manufacture. Shiman knew all about the Uzi, and in a minute he had equipped himself, as had been his plan. Then he had proceeded to the front truck, wherein the precious *Cross of Sharon* was transported. It took him ample time to break open the sturdy wooden crate and to remove most of the straw. However, what he found there was something he couldn't have expected in his wildest dreams. Pierce and Michael found him staring at the huge golden cross, while sitting in the straw.

"Shiman!" Pierce shouted. "What are you up to!?"

There was no answer. Pierce and Michael embarked the back of the van, and they noticed that Shiman was transfixed on top of the cross, staring at the central rose, all crafted of large dark-red rubies. He was completely frozen and held the Uzi firmly clamped in his hand with the barrel upwards, and then, suddenly, his whole body started to shake. Michael tried to remove his gun, but Shiman didn't let go. He exclaimed something in a foreign tongue. Suddenly, a short rattle was heard, and the hood of the van was perforated with a row of small holes. Blood was running out of Shiman's head, and he fell down beside the crate into the straw. Pierce feared the worst, but upon inspection it appeared that Shiman only got a minor wound on his forehead. Pierce took away the Uzi and Michael helped Pierce to carry the victim outside. Bandages were soon found, and Shiman's head wrapped up in a sturdy turban. "Any idiot can pull a trigger, but putting a bandage in place requires slightly more skill," Pierce commented with a sigh.

Michael and Pierce packed up everything again in the crates, very securely.

"We took a hell of a risk taking these refugees with us, Michael," Pierce said. Michael had to agree. When all had returned from the water park, Shiman was already smiling and they were ready to continue their tour.

Dharman had also returned from his walk, during which he had been in contact with the other members of the insurgency, and conveyed the news that the “loot” had been spotted, but could not be liberated by him and his brother alone, since it was guarded by more persons than they had bargained for. They had been scheming what to do next, and decided that the insurgents would highjack the vans right at the refugee camp, when Shiman and Dharman had passed safely inside with their families.

Shiman’s wife approached Michael and Pierce in the front van asking what had happened to Shiman, as they noticed that his head was all wrapped up. “My husband says nothing to me, and is only laughing nervously. Did he get sunstroke?” she asked.

“He unfortunately has fallen out of the van and hit his head,” said Michael. “But he will be OK soon again.” Luckily, Shiman didn’t remember what had happened, and he didn’t mention anything about a golden cross or a shipment of weapons.

Michael felt relieved. “Let’s hope there is no great harm done,” he said to Pierce, when they were again driving. “At least we know now that this cross is not an ordinary cross.”

“Would it have theophanic powers?” asked Pierce.

“Theo... *what?*” asked Michael.

“Ah... let it be,” said Pierce.

After about ten kilometres, the little village of Al’Sabboura was already quite near. Michael had got directions on the phone from Eric how to get to their famous establishment. First there should be a high sign, well visible from the road, reading *Swiss House*. There they should turn left and right, and then they should be quite close to the restaurant, which Eric had baptised *Bristol Gardens*, also visible on a high sign. Of course, the children were all in good appetite after an hour of splashing around in the water, and the place was looking very inviting. The army trucks were put on a huge parking lot, and they noticed a tall woman stepping out of the modern entrance, waving both her hands.

“It’s Sylvia!” Sheila enthused.

“Well, she is well-tanned and wholesomely aged, as we all are,” said Michael.

Everybody hopped out, including Shiman, who by now made the impression of drunkenness. “We are all very hungry, hungry, hungry,” he sang in a high voice. Dharman was looking very worried. He didn’t recognise his brother, and looked on him with a gaze of bewilderment.

Maria and Marco had stepped out the second truck. “Yet again an unexpected oasis in the middle of nowhere. The surprises never end!” said Maria.

When they had all got out, Pierce proposed he would stay on watch, as it seemed they were carrying much more dangerous stuff than they had realised. “Human aid supplies, my *ass*!” he complained. In the meantime, Eric had appeared in the entrance, where Michael met him and gave him a hug. “Eric, old pal! What on earth have you been doing in such a remote spot? Not even left us any message!”

Eric replied: “It was all a bit on the spur of the moment, but we’ve been quite content here. Even these terrible conflicts have not affected our life too much. We already talked about this on the phone, didn’t we?”

“Yes, yes. If it’s OK with you, we’ll all have a bit of food. We are on the way to Damascus, as you know, and possibly we can visit you later on, when we just get rid of our precious luggage.”

“That’s OK. Lunchtime has just ended, and most of the locals have left, so we have some space again to accommodate you.”

“Fine!” said Michael, “and remember that everything is on *me*.”

The menu was, considering the apparent remoteness of the spot, surprisingly tasty and versatile. The French fries were highly appreciated by the crowd of children. When everybody had eaten, Shiman had managed to imbibe a whole bottle of white wine on top, and he was now clearly inebriated. Dharman was very silent. He knew nothing about what had



happened to his brother, but he kept wondering at his weird change of disposition, and feared their quest was at risk.

Michael and Sheila took the opportunity to have a little chat with their hosts. On the repeated question of how it all had started, Eric commented: “Yes, Michael, you see, after you left, new people came in, and the atmosphere changed. I wouldn’t say it was getting worse, but somehow we gradually started to look for something else. Sylvia had many relatives and friends living in Damascus, and in the summer of 2006 we stayed with them. Then we heard that there was a bakery for sale, and we decided that it might be an ideal place for a restaurant of this type. This little village was favourably on the border of the desert, with enough people living nearby, and all a bit from different origin. In fact, there are some very posh living areas here, such as Al Kadiri. Also Damascus is close by, and many tourists passed here daily from Beirut to Damascus, while people from Damascus were regularly enjoying the sea shore in Beirut and the yachting, so Sylvia proposed that we might buy the place, and turn it into a large restaurant with facilities for large meetings.”

“Indeed,” said Sylvia. “I believed then that we might manage fairly well here, and Eric agreed. All in all, Syria was still reasonably safe, before it all abruptly changed.”

“But, how can you stand the *heat*?” asked Sheila.

“Air conditioning, it helps a lot” said Sylvia, “and a swimming pool. Many have a swimming pool here.”

“So, you have not had any great trouble here?” asked Michael.

“A few times only. Homs, Aleppo and Hama, that’s a different case. Generally, when people arrive with guns, I ask them to leave them outside otherwise I promise they won’t get any food. Of course one day some of these guys didn’t comply and threatened to shoot me and my wife. I had to keep my head cool, and said that in that case they *definitively* wouldn’t get any food. They luckily had some reserve of humour, and heartily laughed... Of course our last resort is our passport.”

“You mean they wouldn’t do any harm to British citizens?”

“Quite so. What, if I may ask, is the status of your quest? You were awfully secretive on the phone. Have you really got this golden cross with you?”

“Yes, but keep your voice down, and better not mention the cross,” Michael hushed. “Unfortunately we can tell you only later, when we have dumped all our stuff in Damascus. We picked up these people on the road, and we will leave them at the refugee camp. Do you know where it is?”

“Just a few kilometres down the road,” said Eric.

“If it is so close by, maybe I just have another beer,” said Michael. “This adventure is definitively going too fast.”

“OK... On the phone you said that Hartford has gone on pension. Is he well?”

“Yes, he has been indulging in new, difficult studies at home, and I feel he is becoming a bit of a hermit. I offered him to join the quest, but he declined.”

“So, it is a real *quest* you’re on?” asked Sylvia.

“Yes, an important one,” said Sheila. “Still, we cannot say much definitive about it right now.”

At this point, at the other side of the restaurant, Shiman was starting to sing loudly some song in Arabic. The children were clapping their hands to accompany his song, but Dharman was looking grim, and sat in a dark corner, discussing silently with his wife. Their trafficking in arms was on the brink of getting badly upset by Shiman, who was not quite himself.

“Well, the refugees seem to manage fairly well,” said Sheila.

“A weird family,” Eric commented. “The men look familiar. Where are they from?”

“They said they are from Aleppo, and have been four years out of the country. We’ll deliver them in the hands of the Red Cross, and then we can get further on our way,” said Michael. “So, you have been safe here... that is nice. What about the new conflicts in the north?”

“Abroad they call it a civil war again, but it is more fitting to say that it is a disorganised, diffused conflict between two stubborn Arabic groups in the north of Syria, which both oppose the new government, but now are fighting among themselves. Luckily, they are now both represented in parliament, and a resolution is underway, in which more autonomy is given to some districts in the region. Surely, there has been some shooting here too, even a few months ago, but it has now subsided.”

“So NATO’s presence has had a favourable effect?” asked Sheila.

“Yeah, sure! It is largely the parliament where things are still quite unsettled. They are not yet quite up to thinking pragmatically and making compromises, as they do in a mature democracy,” Eric explained.

“Yes, that everybody understands. Anyway, what about later? Are you able to lodge us for one night, before we return?” asked Michael.

“Yeah, sure,” said Eric. “There’s room enough here. Where are you going to?”

“Back to Greece. We have some business in Delphi.”

“What on earth are you doing there?” asked Eric.

“It is not really much of a secret, this quest of ours: we are helping with the revival of the famous oracle.”

“Well... I say, old chap. That is quite a clever feat! There’s good money in tourism nowadays in these regions.”

“Indeed,” Michael mumbled. He’d rather not issue any further comments for the time being, as to the more serious nature of the quest. He slowly drank his cold lager.

After half an hour, the whole party was ready to leave again. Pierce had stayed with the trucks, and received some food for the road. Soon he sat beside Michael in the front van eating and drinking while they were driving further down the high road towards Damascus. It had got quite hot, and luckily it was only a short drive to the next stop. Soon they saw the large signs, with Arabic and English text, of the Red Cross refugee camp at Al’Sabboura appearing on the left side of the road. They parked on the

right, and the whole party crossed towards a large gate, where two sentries were keeping post. Behind the fenced area, there was a huge administration building, and behind it sea of white and grey tents. Dharman and Shiman with their family members were let through after the sentries checked their papers, and their names were written down in a register. They also got some instructions in Arabic.

Michael also showed his papers, and asked if he could have a short word with the camp supervisor. With his METFOR clearance he could overrule any objections, and he soon stepped down into the large administration building. He knocked on the door of the camp supervisor, somebody called James Cummings. They introduced themselves to each other, and then Michael asked: "Are you, by chance waiting for extra aid supplies from the METFOR?"

"No. We have no dealings with the METFOR in aid supplies," said Cummings. "How so?"

"Well, that explains it. I think we will now need to return this stuff to METFOR then."

"Which stuff?"

"That which according to us now appears as a metaphor for aid supplies," Michael said with a grin on his face. "Sorry for the disturbance."

Michael returned to the entrance and close by the gate, on the right, he observed a large, neat field, where young children in blue and red were playing a neatly organised football match. Two respectable men clothed in yellow suits were refereeing the game, and it all appeared to be a festive occasion. A large crowd of spectators was cheering around the field, and the children of Shiman and Dharman had immediately run off to watch the game. Pierce was also watching behind the fence.

"Everybody got in safely?" asked Michael.

"Easy to get in, but difficult to get out, I feel," said Pierce.

"I guess so," Michael mumbled.

Dharman, on the other side of the fence, approached, and turned to Michael. "Thanks very much for the ride and the dinner. It was very much appreciated. Do you think my brother will be OK? Did he hit his head hard?"

"I don't know. I suppose they can check him out in the field hospital, but I don't think his affliction is of a physical nature," said Michael.

"As you say," Dharman uttered. "He is indeed not quite himself. Well, have a good trip!" He thus followed the others inside and then joined the crowd that was watching the football game.

Initially, Michael, Marco and Pierce had wanted to get rolling again, but Sheila and Maria had been walking along the fence to have a better view of what was happening on the football field, and thus they decided to join the ladies and also shortly watch the game. It was evidently approaching its final minutes, and when the last whistle was blown, there were lots of cheers, applause and dancing.

"Well," said Sheila. "I think we've seen all of it. Nice they have some action around here."

"Hmm." Maria said. "One of these referees looks like Matheos. You see that man over there, in the yellow suit?"

"Could it be dad?" Sheila asked.

To Michael the man appeared also familiar, but he said: "No, no, he is too young and fit. Wouldn't he have celebrated his 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday this summer? I don't think he could be refereeing a whole football match at such an age."

They had slowly crossed the road and walked back towards the trucks, and Michael and Pierce were just stepping inside when they heard somebody yelling from the other side of the road.

"Sheila! Maria!" somebody shouted. They all looked back and saw it was the referee in his yellow suit.

"Dad!" Sheila exclaimed.

The man was waving with both his hands to get attention. "Wait for me!" he yelled.

"It *is* John!" Michael exclaimed.

They all saw him running along the fence. "I've been expecting you!" he yelled enthusiastically, and then he leapt out of the gate towards them. They all stood as nailed to the ground. Suddenly, a white vehicle passed by on the other side of the road, and Michael shouted: "WATCH IT!!!!", but it was too late. It was an army personnel tank with the METFOR emblem, which had approached with tremendous speed and it bumped John straight off the road. He flew up high in the air, smashed against the high fence of the refugee camp, and landed as a small heap in the dusty trench some twenty meters further. The white vehicle slammed on the brakes, and came to a sudden stand.

Sheila ran off instantly, and the others followed promptly. When they had arrived on the spot where John was lying, one soldier stepped out of the front cabin and ten other military men appeared out of the back of the heavy vehicle. Some of them proceeded slowly towards the victim, others, however, spotted the three unguarded METFOR trucks at the other side of the road, and started to inspect them.

Sheila and Maria were the first to reach John. They both threw themselves on his side. Maria and Sheila carefully turned him on his back, and Michael, Marco and Pierce saw he was quite lifeless. Both women sat by his side. They then noticed he was trying to speak, and with a slight feeling of relief, Sheila took John's head in her lap. "What on earth were you doing here? Why did you leave?" she asked.

"I am sorry, Sheila," John stammered weakly. Then he turned to look at Maria, saying: "Sorry for all the secrecy."

"That's all right," Sheila said.

Maria had approached from the side and she put her hand on John's forehead, asking: "Are you my father?"

“No... no... You are Mathew’s child, my dear,” John said softly. He coughed up some blood, and tried to speak again. For a little while he couldn’t get air in his lungs, but with a renewed effort he gaped for some air and said: “Still... without my advice... you would not have been born.”

“Why? What do you mean?” asked Maria.

“After Mathew left... your mother, Anna-Sofia... she wanted an abortion, but I persuaded her not to... not for those Catholics, you hear, but just... just for the joy of life... and for the future.” He raised his hand towards Maria, and muttered: “At the critical time I advised her to go on a long holiday and think it over. Was I not right?”

“Yes, yes, of course you were right!” Maria said.

John shook with a frail laughter: “You wouldn’t have been here if I weren’t right... Nobody is here by accident...” Again he coughed some blood, and he turned his eyes to Sheila. He saw her tears running down. “But I certainly met my fate now... I’m afraid it has to be our last meeting in this sphere of life, my child.”

“No! No! We have just found you... don’t go!” Sheila cried.

However, it was of no avail: John Armstrong’s time had come. He was slowly passing to the other side. “I have failed... it was all in vain... Bring me back to Muirkirk... bring me home,” he stammered. His eyes were suddenly darker and he lifted his arm, pointing towards the white personnel tank. Almost inaudibly he said: “Beware of Pytho!” Then his head dropped.

Sheila and Maria were both crying, and clung on to John. Although he had seen it a few times with Maria, it was a long time since Michael had observed his own wife in a state of despair. He felt helpless, and despite the heat of the high noon he suddenly felt cold. Besides Maria one of the army men stooped over the scene. Sheila looked up and shouted to him: “You *IDIOTS*! Can’t you look where you’re driving?!”

“We are very sorry, Ma’am,” the soldier said, “but he suddenly stepped on the road, straight before us.”

Another man had emerged from the camp. It was the other referee of the football match, and when he had pressed himself through the small crowd he asked: "Is brother Matheos dead?"

"We are not sure, but it doesn't look all too well. Who are you?" asked Pierce.

"I am brother Vincenzo."

"Did you come from the same place as the victim?" Pierce inquired.

"Yes," the man said.

"And where are you from?" asked Michael.

"The Abbey of the Rose Cross," Vincenzo replied. "What are we going to do now?"

"Can you transport this man to Damascus?" Michael asked from the military man.

"I think we will have to, yes, and we should report this to our commanding officer too," the soldier said. "So, he is a relative, the father of this woman?" he then asked, pointing to Sheila.

"Yes," said Michael. He then realised that they might be in for trouble if they would claim the victim to be Sheila's father, but presently he pushed the thought aside.

"I can turn back to Damascus to bring him to hospital. We have a stretcher. This is an army ambulance, intended to transport our injured mates," the driver of the army tank explained.

"Well, then it is clear what your duty is, isn't it? But wait a little while still," said Michael. There was a solemn silence.

Sheila and Maria were still sitting beside John, hoping he would still give a sign of life, but it was of no avail. "I'm afraid there is nothing we can do," said Sheila. "He has died. Whatever was planned, it was not to be," she muttered, and she carefully closed John's eyes. Then she looked upward, and addressed the soldier: "Can we not bring him to the Abbey, would that not be more appropriate?"



Vincenzo said: “There is an infirmary, and it’s not such a long distance. I think that would be best.”

“I will need your names, and the name of the diseased,” the METFOR man said.

“We will give you all the information you need, when we first get there,” said Michael.

Two other soldiers had fetched a stretcher, and carefully lifted John on it. He was covered with a grey blanket, and carried inside the back of the white, heavy vehicle. Michael and brother Vincenzo conversed a while with the driver of the personnel tank, giving him directions where to go, and then under the watchful eyes of a large crowd of people they all prepared to drive further in the direction of Damascus. Another vehicle had appeared on the road, but had stopped at a safe distance from the scene. Slowly the insurgents withdrew, driving back from where they came from. Their operation was seriously jeopardised.

### 3

Arrival at the Abbey of the Rose Cross, a few kilometres west of the old town of Damascus, was at two o’clock. The four army vehicles stopped before a large roman gate with two richly carved wooden doors. They soon opened, and a great crowd of hermits, all dressed in brown habits, emerged to welcome their treasure, which was lost for three centuries. They also hailed the benevolent guests who had so bravely returned it without any apparent self-interest. However, when a stretcher with a covered body was carried inside, they heard the alarming news that one of their beloved brothers had met with a fatal accident. The space inside the walls was much larger than the visitors had expected: There were many separate buildings, and through the directions of brother Vincenzo the body of the victim was carried into the infirmary by four friars. The large crate with the Cross of Sharon was instantly transferred under Michael’s supervision into the main chapel, while Pierce negotiated briefly with the NATO men, who

soon went on their way. It was agreed that they would visit the base camp of the METFOR already the next day, to deliver the so-called 'human aid supplies'.

After parking the three army trucks in the inner courtyard, they all followed the victim to the infirmary, and waited for half an hour in the entrance hall. After half an hour, one of the brothers and the abbot, Konstantinos, appeared and informed that brother Matheos had died, evidently of massive internal bleedings.

They all entered the abbot's office to have a consoling cup of tea. The abbot was a grave looking man with a long white beard, in a hesitant state of mind, trying to answer the surprising questions that Sheila started to ask about the deceased person, such as who he was and where he had come from. The abbot explained that brother Matheos had arrived in the autumn of 2005, and had been working at the library, of which he had become the curator.

"This is a responsible job, Madame, because there is a highly valuable collection of old scriptures, of which even the Vatican would be jealous," he explained, "but why do you ask all these questions? Do you know the deceased?"

"Yes, we do: His name was not Matheos at all," said Sheila. "He was my father and I think we should tell you about him, and what he has been doing before he came to Damascus."

The abbot was utterly baffled, staring at Sheila for a while, and then uttered a deep sigh. He stretched out his hands, saying: "In that case, I suppose, Ma'am, you are, as I am, in dire need of something stronger than tea!" He opened a small secret door in his desk, from where a generous bottle of Courvoisier VSOP and a whole series of small silver cups appeared.

Thus, after some heart-warming tea with Cognac, the abbot was informed of all the things that had taken place in the long life of his late librarian. After all the variegated explanations, Konstantinos remarked:

“Well, many things fit in with what he has been telling us. He told me that he originally came from Scotland, that he had lived on Crete, that he had visited India and China, and then lived for a few years on the island of Madeira. So you mean to say your father has been officially dead already for many years?”

“I’m afraid so, yes, and I think we will have to identify him for practical reasons as *Mathew* Armstrong because at this stage we don’t want to make things more complicated than they are,” said Sheila.

“Ah, I see... but... how then did you know he was *here*?” Konstantinos asked.

“The strange thing is that we didn’t. Of course, if we would have used our brains a bit more, we might have inferred it. As it turned out, we just spotted him at the Al’Sabboura refugee camp after bringing in some exiles we had picked up on the road, and it was my father who spotted us in the end. In his enthusiasm he ran along the fence and when he ran towards us out of the main gate, he was bumped off the road by that army truck.”

“O dear!” sighed Konstantinos, “I wish to express my deep regrets to you all, and particularly to you, Ma’am. He must have got quite a blow. Still, for your comfort, I can say he probably didn’t feel much pain.”

“I certainly hope so... I was quite surprised to see that he was in such excellent physical condition, managing a whole football game at the age of 82, that really surprised us,” said Sheila.

“You mean he was already over eighty years old?!” Konstantinos exclaimed.

“Yes, he was. Still, before he passed away he was able to converse a little and he conveyed to us a few important things: firstly, he said that Maria here,” Sheila pointed towards Maria sitting a bit more in the back with Marco, “is the daughter of his brother Mathew.”

“And that was the one who died in Lockerbie, wasn’t it?” asked Konstantinos.

“Yes, and another thing he said was that he’d like to be brought back to Muirkirk. You see, father wanted to be buried near his house in one of those old bronze-age cairns. In fact, that is where his brother has been resting till this day.”

“If that is what he wanted, we will have to respect it,” said Konstantinos.

“Do you think it is possible to get my father smuggled back to Scotland?”

“Well, getting him out of the country might succeed with the help of the METFOR. I suppose they are somewhat in your debt. Did Matheos say anything more?”

“Yes, for instance that *‘all is lost’*?”

“Oh? What in heaven’s sake is lost?” asked Konstantinos.

“Well, maybe he meant to say that the quest we’re on has been jeopardised by his untimely death. We think he was due to play an active role in it, and was awaiting us in all secrecy.”

“What kind of quest are you referring to?”

“The key to it is worded in a small code we found in one of his writings,” said Michael, and he produced a small piece of paper from an album, which he handed over to the abbot.

After reading the short epistle, Konstantinos cried: “Good gracious! Almost something out of a grotesque novel!”

“It is, unfortunately, a true affair,” said Michael, “and we are doing our best to get to the bottom of it. Does this little message convey anything to you?”

“It is a bit vague, but certainly not discordant with Matheos’ style. He used words like *afar* and *ajar*. I suppose it is about an adept that will come out of Damascus at an appointed time, and has some role to fulfil in Delphi. Still, how this is all related to him I find very difficult to grasp,” Konstantinos explained.

“Maybe you are not aware of it, but the appointed time seems to have arrived, and with our help they are already reconstructing the Oracle of Delphi in Greece,” said Sheila.

“But *why*! And why *now*!?” cried Konstantinos.

“What exactly was my father doing here? You said he was the head librarian. Did he have any special duties or interests, or other things he was working on?” Sheila inquired.

“Yes, many things. When Matheos - if I may still call him by that name for convenience - arrived here, I noticed he was well versed in old Latin and Greek, even Coptic - although I noticed to my surprise that he spoke modern Greek very poorly. I am from Greece myself, you see. Anyway, I found him very suitable for doing some research in our library, and he has, indeed, studied the Corpus Hermeticum for considerable time, particularly the second book, the General Sermon,” Konstantinos explained.

“Is that not the *lost* book of the Corpus Hermeticum?” asked Michael.

“Hmm. Do you know something about it too?” asked Konstantinos,

“Yes, we are all acquainted with the Corpus Hermeticum, and at least I personally am very fond of it,” said Michael.

“Ah, I see... Well... here in this monastery most of Matheos’ work has been spent on deciphering three valuable papyrus scrolls of the hand of Democritus. These documents were deposited at this monastery by Clement of Alexandria in the year 211, after he had fled from Alexandria. There were originally five scrolls, but in 1720 two of them were stolen, together with the Cross of Sharon and some other treasures. When Matheos arrived here, he apparently knew much about the subject. He embarked on the translation, and thus found out that the first scroll was written in the years immediately following the Persian wars when Democritus was still young and was studying in various quarters of the world. They comprise a valuable first-hand account of the *General Sermon* of the Corpus Hermeticum, which Democritus had written down after a course in Hermopolis given by Hermes Trismegistus himself. Interestingly,

it proves that the Hermetic writings were pre-Ptolemaic, and they even show that the Egyptians at that time anticipated the coming of Christ together with the Jews. Now, brother Mathew's notion was that these scrolls must have been translated earlier by other people - by *whom* and *how* we still don't know - but eventually they appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century as the *Kybalion*. Anyway, Matheos has recently finished translating all the three scrolls, and we are on the point of publishing them," said Konstantinos.

"Please tell us more about these scrolls and their contents," asked Sheila.

"In the first it is all about the general teachings of Hermes. In the second scroll Democritus has written down a long discussion with his pupil Hippocrates, many years after his first writings, when he was about seventy years old. This is in the time after the Peloponnesian war, and Democritus laments to Hippocrates the fall of Greece, and the general physiognomy of economic and political decline. Democritus is at the same time depressed because his wife had died when he was visiting Athens. As solace, Hippocrates gives him a precious ring, called Abraxsyne, a name arguably referring to a Gnostic origin, but which he gives to his former teacher of philosophy in the hope that he could learn something of its secret wisdom. In the end, Democritus mentions that he shows Hippocrates his laboratory, proving that Democritus must have been a practical alchemist, as is also clear from the start of the epistle, which describes something of the recipe for the *Elixir of Life*, and the preparation of a magical form of *Electrum*."

"How very interesting," said Michael, "and what about the third scroll?"

"Well, the third one continues directly where the second left off. Hippocrates leaves the home of Democritus with the remark that philosophy has, in the end, not proven to be very useful, and that at least the art of Alchemy seems to him of more practical value. Democritus

realises that Hippocrates is right, and this is followed by an account of his attempts to learn the secrets of Abraxsyne. Maybe this is a long story, and you can read the text all yourselves.”

“So, must I conclude that someone had been here in earlier times, and had already seen an opportunity to copy or translate these papyrus scrolls?” asked Michael.

“Yes, so we must conclude. There can hardly be any doubt. The texts were published by various Rosicrucian circles, and it seems this explains why they tried to unify Christianity with Platonism, Gnosticism and Alchemy. This we must conclude, because the original donator of the scrolls, Clement of Alexandria, does not write about them. Clearly so because these papers were in great disagreement with his credo that philosophy is the proper road to faith. Democritus’ papers, namely, prove the contrary: by philosophy we cannot arrive at faith, since philosophy is too much tied up with reason and logic that leads, in the end, to a paradox, an inner conflict in man. In the Hermetic teachings it is called the Divine Paradox, which man cannot else but accept as irresolvable.”

“Yes, so it seems to be,” said Michael. “Well, then it is clear to us that John was not here by chance. We should inform you that John, before he came to Damascus, had been scrutinising also the two other scrolls of Democritus, who yet describe his sojourn to Anatolia and Persia, after having visited in Delphi.”

“How is that possible?” said Konstantinos.

“Simply by the fact that these scrolls were hidden at the same location as the Cross of Sharon. Although John writes in his diary that these scrolls were kept at a monastery in Maleme, I think this was camouflage.”

“Ah, so you mean to say that brother Matheos, when he was working here, knew all about the cross of Sharon, and the missing scrolls, and where they were hidden?”

“As we already more or less told you,” said Sheila, “he was for a number of years the unofficial curator of a Rosicrucian shrine on Madeira.

His main purpose was to keep the hidden treasures out of the hands of the family that had originally stolen them, but at the same time he must have been studying on all the unknown literature that was stowed away there, because it was a subject that deeply interested him.”

“But, why on earth did he keep it all secret, even to *me*? Was he perhaps in the end also overcome by worldly ambition?”

“I don’t believe so,” said Sheila, “I think it was primarily for safety reasons. Some of these treasures are potentially dangerous.”

“And what are these... other treasures?” Konstantinos asked in a dark voice.

“They are all related to an ancient God-Goddess, of which Democritus writes in his last series of scrolls, where the Godhead is called Cybele, but later by the Pythia in Delphi designated as Mnemosyne,” Sheila explained. “All these treasures were stowed away in Maria’s house on Madeira, and they were collected mainly in the early eighteenth century by Scottish Rosicrucians. They, of course, helped my father a lot in his quest of finding the lost key of creation, which was once communicated in clear terms to mankind - verbally, but also in a book.”

“You mean the lost book of Thoth?” asked Konstantinos.

“Arguably. This book has at least been found in the shrine in Madeira, but it was likely not yet found by my father, who hesitated to open the sarcophagus of Mnemosyne.”

“Sarcophagus? So in the end Matheos actually found the cist of Cybele?”

“O, yes. We have taken pictures. We can show you,” said Sheila, and Michael handed over a small photo album from his travel case. Konstantinos browsed slowly through the rather thick album, mumbling his comments. “Well, this is clearly the triangular altar of the Ibis, the God Thoth, indeed... Mnemosyne, the *Fairy of the Good Tree*... Ningishida... Cybele... Demeter... Ceres... Hmm,” he mumbled. Then he fumbled further and when he came to a large photograph of the two-headed



mummy, he made the sign of the cross, and exclaimed: “Holy Mother Mary!”

#### 4

After the variegated and dramatic course of events on Saturday, the Sunday had come after a short night’s sleep in the rather unadorned, but comfortable guest house of the Abbey. There appeared to be a large crowd of other guests lodged at the Abbey of the Rose Cross, people from a great diversity of beliefs and vocation, and all were getting ready for a special service at noon in honour of the return of the Cross of Sharon, a fact that had been secretly circulated to a selected public. At the appointed time they were gathered in the main chapel. The friars were residing high on the loft, while there were pilgrims and scholars of all kinds gathered in the nave, together with a small group of special visitors seated in the lower vestibule. The five guests of honour, however, had been invited to take seat in the front bench. For some, like Pierce and Marco, it was a somewhat dubious position, for they had not seen the inside of a church for many years, but still they had accepted the offer with gratitude.

The cross had been placed back in its original place, behind the altar, and was still covered with a dark blue satin curtain. The cross was standing between two large frescos, depicting Saint Ananias and the stages of the conversion of the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus into Saint Paul, the apostle of Christ. There were various paintings and icons of St Ephrem, the 4<sup>th</sup> century hymnographer and theologian, one of the Saints of the Syriac Orthodox Church. Also the sistrum had been returned to its original location: back into the hand of Cybele, to restore the legendary bronze statue that was placed in a recess at the entrance of the chapel.

The service started with the entry of the abbot Konstantinos, with his entourage, carrying the Syrian cross in front. When they had entered and got seated, the coffin of John Armstrong alias Matheos Viglis was carried in front of the altar, accompanied by a plain chant of the *Tantum ergo*

resounding from the balustrade. Maria recognised the delicate setting of Joseph Marie Déodat de Sévérac, music she had frequently used with her choir in the services in the church of Sao Martinho. After their entry, Konstantinos started a rather long Liturgy in old Aramaic, which was not understood by the foreign guests, but after a few more hymns, Konstantinos proceeded unexpectedly in plain English.

“Dear brothers, sisters, guests and visitors, all united in Christ! I bid you all welcome to our shrine. Today we celebrate the return of our precious cross, since nearly 300 years lost, and all at once returned from such a remote place as Madeira. The cross brings us back to the founding days of this shrine. It is thus appropriate at this point to shortly explain our position as a church, and our history. Truly, our history goes back to the first century, a monastery erected by Saint Ananias, right after the events portrayed in the Bible, in the Acts of the Apostles, concerning the conversion of Saul. To recall to your mind, Saul was originally a Pharisee, a student of Gamaliel, who was, as the scripture says *‘breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord’* He thus obtained permission from the Jewish high priest in Jerusalem to visit the synagogues at Damascus, and to bring anyone *belonging to the Way*, in fetters to Jerusalem, because in those days Christianity was a grave heresy. Thus the scripture says: *Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying unto him: ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’ The men who were travelling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision: ‘Ananias.’ And he said, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ And the Lord said unto him: ‘Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he*

*is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.' But the Lord said unto him, 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and Kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened."*

Konstantinos laid down the scripture, and continued: "This epistle is well known, even to non-Christians, and it has kept a living tradition here in Damascus, unfortunately also in a touristic sense. Still, the real meaning of the story remains a bit of a riddle to many. There is truly much hidden allegory in this story, as is the case in most of the texts of the Bible. Besides being a historical account, which can easily be verified, there are things in it that require something of a third ear. Firstly, the allusion to the people *belonging to the Way* is in some sense linked with Ananias' visit to the house of Judas in the *street called Straight*. Thus we are told that the road to faith and salvation is a *straight* way on two occasions. As Christ has told us, the way to Faith is not full of turns and twists; it is a straight way: we are to obey the simple truths of his teaching, which comprises the Divine Law of Love. As one female English writer expressed it: *that blended common-sense and fresh untarnished feeling, which is the healthy eye of the soul*. However, the way the Lord speaks to Saul and his servant Ananias, is far from simple. Towards Saul he appears as a blinding light, asking him why he persecutes Him, and then orders him to go into town where he will get orders what to do. Saul cannot do otherwise, because he is blinded by the Light, but later on we hear that he is praying and has been three days without food, and

was given a vision of Ananias visiting him and giving him his eyesight back. Thus, we can deduce that Saul is already on the way to conversion, because he has been praying and fasting, and thus already resides on the *Road called straight*. The Lord gave him the vision of getting cured already before Ananias hears of it. Also with his servant Ananias, the Lord goes about in a very strange indirect fashion: He instructs him to go to Judas' house, telling him that Saul has seen a vision in which he will lay hands on him that he might regain his eyesight, as if it were already a *fait accompli*. Still, Ananias, seeing Saul as his enemy, questions the Lord why he is to do so, and he gets the explanation that Saul has still much suffering ahead. As we learn from the scripture, Saint Paul was imprisoned in Rome, and was likely beheaded in the end."

"Now, what does this all *mean*? We observe in this story a certain view of the *sola fide*, but also related to this the importance of *works*. Grace comes with faith as a blinding light, this is the first thing. After this, in second place, comes the deliverance from blindness, resulting in a new view of life and it is intrinsically connected with the new tasks man takes on himself, the works that he will do *as a consequence of* this new faith: He is put on the *straight path*. This means that all works, whatever useful and benevolent, as done by men out of themselves, without this faith, will not lead to anything but chaos in the world, and it will give no grace. Thus, many politicians and rulers are doomed to fail. In this country we have seen many years of terrible bloodshed, and people are asking: 'Why does the World not react?' The answer is: 'The world *has* reacted, only in an unexpected way. As a good example I give to you our cherished brother Matheos, who has met with such an unfortunate accident yesterday. Was he flowing over of questions of '*Something needs to be done?*' – No. He followed in all things his own notions of normal enthusiastic socialising, reading, walking and, at certain times, intensive squabbling. Particularly his arguing left me at the end of the day always in an uplifted mood, after having thought it all over a little bit longer. It seems his way of life has kept

him young, because he was in his last day refereeing a football match at the age of eighty two! Still he had the greatest contempt for sports, as he said, and I gathered he meant professional sports. The main thing I put to you: He never asked: *'Is this what God expects of me?'* Still we all know he was an enlightened person, as it seems he had a very rich inner life, but also, as I have learned yesterday, a very dramatic past. Now what is, in all this, the role of *sacrifice*? How much do we have to suffer for the sake of *His Name*? Not more than he chooses to ask from us. Carry your own burdens first, before you can carry those of others. This brings us to the role of works. All work without a feeling of enthusiasm is in vain. All work without the feeling of duty useless. In our global economy we have, in some strange way, lost this feeling of duty and enthusiasm to create the things we *really* need. Do we need all these cheap gadgets and stuff to be happy, are they *essential*? The real happiness goes into the process of creating something *yourself*. The same it is with faith. The *light* is given to you, and it will put you on the straight road, but you have to create your faith yourself by the same sense of duty and enthusiasm that surrounds your works. It is not more than finding your own unique place in the Universe. God has given you a name and a place in his house, but you don't have to deserve it, you just have to *find* it." Konstantinos turned around to the altar lifted his hands, and then the service proceeded again in an unknown liturgy.

Plainsong was heard again, and the end of the service soon approached. The coffin was stately carried outside the chapel, and would be preserved at the Abbey until clearance for shipping would be given. The *Cross of Sharon* was, however, not yet unveiled. This, Konstantinos had explained to his guests beforehand, would be done at a special time of day, at the end of the service, which was just approaching.

The patriarchs, led by Konstantinos, all gathered before the altar, and now a Gregorian plainsong resounded from the loft. To Maria's ears it was again quite familiar: the *Haec Dies quam fecit Dominus, exultemus et laetemur in ea*. The blue shroud was slowly lowered, and within a few minutes of silent

waiting, a beam of sunlight fell onto the centre of the cross. The Rose of Rubies reflected the sunlight in beams of red light through the whole chapel, and it made the impression of rotation, which was due to the slow movement of the sunbeam over the cross. Then the beam disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared. The Light had been given. With this the service had ended. All the persons present silently left the chapel.

However, Maria and Sheila remained. They approached the altar, looking upon the cross in its proper setting, between the two paintings of St. Paul of Tarsus and St. Ananias of Damascus.

“Strange, that it was so easy for you to part with it,” said Sheila. “You didn’t feel the least temptation to sell this golden cross during all these years?”

“No, no, I wouldn’t dare,” said Maria.

“It’s a sorrowful affair, all these treasures squandered and misused.”

“What now, when your father is gone, are we to do?”

“In Delphi, you mean?”

“Yes. I suppose Gillian and Dorothea were right: what use is it to return to the Pagan rites?” Maria sighed.

“Maybe at the time there were a little bit too many scriptures burnt, and too many wise people with it,” said Sheila. She turned around and walked away from the altar. “Maybe something essential was lost.”

“I think I will say a little prayer still,” said Maria.

“I already said mine,” said Sheila and she walked on through the nave.

Maria, however, kneeled down on the bench for the Eucharist, and closed her eyes. In all silence she said her prayer, questioning: *‘What are we to do? We are on a mission which seems out of time, and I have the feeling we are only offending you, our Lord. What am I to do? Is this all in vain? Should I also just pack my bags and leave? I am not worthy of anything. I have offended you, and lied to everybody.’*

She was about to rise, when all of a sudden she observed a strange movement inside the cross: it was as if the rose in the centre was opening

up. Some sort of rotating light appeared again, but now it kept growing in size. Initially quite similar as to when the sun beam had illuminated it, there were now other features to be seen: red flames licked inside some sort of tunnel, and suddenly a human figure appeared, surrounded by red flames in the form of wings. Maria was caught with great fear, because the spectre she beheld was awesome to behold. She noticed it was beckoning her to come nearer.

About an hour later, when after the service all had enjoyed their victuals in the great dining hall, Sheila started wondering why Maria was lingering, and where she might have gone to. First she went to the dormitory, but found the guest room reserved for the Ferraris couple empty. Sheila recalled that Marco was still having his lunch. Then she returned to the Chapel, and found Maria lying asleep before the Eucharist bench. She sat beside her on the floor, and carefully shook her shoulder. "Maria, wake up! Wake up!"

With a sudden shock, Maria jumped to her feet, almost in anguish. "Where am I?" she stammered.

"In Damascus," said Sheila, "in the chapel of the Rose Cross. Are you OK? Just an hour ago we were here in a service. Have you fallen asleep during your prayer?" Sheila saw distress on Maria's face. She looked around in great bewilderment.

"What is the time?" she asked.

"Half past two," said Sheila, "How so?"

Maria stammered restlessly: "What was it... this thing about Michael..." She started stepping back and forth.

"What do you mean? Is Michael in some sort of danger?" asked Sheila.

"Michael, that husband of yours, is a *brainless fool*!"

"I beg your pardon?!" said Sheila, offended that her life's companion was being called names.

"He's playing with things he should have left in peace! Where is he?!"

“Just about leaving for the METFOR headquarters, with Pierce. They are bringing these crates of weapons to a safer place.”

“The *idiot*!”

“Do you think we should keep these weapons for *ourselves* then?”

“It has nothing to do with these weapons, it is the *Stone*!” said Maria.

“The *what*?”

“The Philosopher’s Stone,” said Maria. “He has been preparing it in all secrecy, and he has brought it *with* him!”

“Are you sure?”

“Damned if not!! You didn’t see his laboratory in the old stable of Sheena?”

“There were some styrox containers, filled with horse manure, but I didn’t think much of it.”

“Ah! You didn’t see the bottles in that manure? Didn’t hear anything about his attempts to prepare the *prima materia*?”

“Well, he has been speaking with his former boss and with Pierce about the primeval mater, yes,” said Sheila, “but I’m not always looking over his shoulder, you know.”

“Afraid of finding him masturbating in the shed?” Maria hissed.

“Maria, for God’s sake, what has come over you, you seem almost bewitched!”

“A good word, Sheila,” said Maria, “Consider me bewitched, because the Pythia *was* a witch. You should have read your sources better. Michael, where is he *now*?”

“I think he just left with Pierce and the trucks.”

“We must follow them, *now* ! Maybe we can still avert a catastrophe!” Maria exclaimed, and she ran out of the chapel with great speed with Sheila at her tail. When they passed through one of the choirs, Maria approached the large bronze statue of Cybele and took hold of the sistrum. Sheila followed her directly, with a confused state of mind. *How did she know all*



*those things? And what in heaven is she going to do with that sistrum?*' she wondered.

Outside on the inner square of the Abbey they found only one remaining truck. Pierce and Michael had left already, and Maria instantly hopped into the cabin. "Hurry up," she said to Sheila. "You can better drive. I'll show you the way."

"How do you know where to go!?" said Sheila.

"Let's say I'm on to Michael's *scent*," said Maria.

## 5

Meanwhile, Michael and Pierce had been on the road already for ten minutes, and they were making good speed. With two truckloads of weaponry, they didn't want to be too long at the mercy of unknown elements. After the disarmament of the local *tribes*, as the various ethnic groups of the population were called in the UK, arms were highly desired. After twenty kilometres they entered the area of METFOR, and asked for the head of the disarmament operations section. Upon showing their papers, they were directed inside, and a soldier joined them to show the way. He was of a very short posture, and could not have been much older than twenty years of age, very red in the face of sunburn.

"How much of this stuff is there?" he asked.

"Two large crates," said Michael. "At least one of them is filled with Uzi's, but the other one we haven't opened yet. They said in Beirut that they were medical supplies and more of that sort."

"Ah, we'll have to study how this all came about," the man said, and then he went to speak to Pierce in the second truck behind. After a moment he came back, and hopped in the front of the first truck beside Michael. "I'll show you the way." They proceeded through the main gate and after a short drive the soldier pointed out the direction: "You have to turn right here, and then enter that large hangar at the end of the road."

Shortly a large shelter appeared, and soon there was a huge space into which both trucks disappeared. Once inside, four men came over to lift the crates out of the vans. The business of the weapons was safely concluded in a quarter of an hour.

When the soldier came back into the truck, Michael asked: "I would like to have a word with one of the commanding officers here, who could be of assistance in giving a clearance of a deceased person, a family member who was overrun by one of your army cars," said Michael.

"Ah! You mean that accident just outside the Al'Sabboura camp?" asked the soldier.

"Indeed, you've heard of it?"

"O, yeah, we've heard some faint rumours about that," the man said. "I'll bring you to major Clancy. He will at least know who can help you with this case."

Within a short time they were directed back to the entrance, and parked the vans on a spotless parking lot in front of a pile of containers, which on further inspection appeared to be office buildings that could be easily shipped all over the world. Major Clancy was available within a short time, and even produced some papers that had to be filled in. "These papers are already somewhat in order," he said. "We are in the process of getting some statement from the Abbey where the victim was employed. Matheos Viglis was his name?" he asked.

"Yes, major," said Michael.

"One of my soldiers said that he was a close family member of one of the persons that was in your company. Is that correct?"

"Yes," said Michael, "He was my wife's uncle, and the father of another person in our group."

"So, you came to visit him?" the major asked.

"No, no, we didn't have any clue he was here. He, in fact, recognised us after the football game at the refugee camp. He ran out to see us, and then got bumped by your truck."

“Nasty case. Damned sorry about this. Please accepts my apologies,” the major said.

“Apologies accepted, the victim was not looking where he was running, and your army van was going much too fast. Anyway, I hope you can help to get him buried in Scotland. That was his wish.” said Michael.

“There is something to be cleared up now,” the major said. “This captain, who was driving this vehicle, witnessed an interesting conversation between the victim and a woman, with the name of Sheila. Who is Sheila?”

“She is... my wife,” Michael stammered.

“Ah, yes. According to two of my men, the victim was the father of the person with the name Sheila, so now I am faced with a strange inconsistency: You say the man was your wife’s uncle, but my men say that the victim was your wife’s father.”

“Maybe they heard wrongly, major,” Michael said politely, but he realised that things were not going to be easy.

“Listen here, mister...?”

“Willmore,” said Michael.

“Two of my men have written a full report of the events that took place and although the conversation with the victim was very short, it was quite clear that he had identified himself as the father of the woman with the name *Sheila*, and was Matheos Viglis his real name? It seems *your* name is not Viglis.”

“His name was Mathew Armstrong, major,” said Michael, slightly blushing, because one lie was now added to the earlier one. “When he moved to Greece he took another name.”

“Hmm... how strange!” major Clancy said. “In the report it says that the victim informed the second woman, with unknown name, to be the daughter of Mathew.”

Michael knew that his game was running short of consistency. Two soldiers had likely overheard the whole conversation. Still he was trying to

find a little hole in the chain of evidence. “Do you have this report here, major?” asked Michael. “Maybe there is a confusion of identity.”

“By all means; you can check it,” said major Clancy. “I’ll have my secretary bring it to you. Maybe you can read it in the officer’s mess. Care for some coffee?”

“Ages since I had a good coffee,” said Pierce, who had been standing a bit behind.

Major Clancy took up the phone and called. “Hey, Liz, lazy bottoms, can you scoop this report of the yesterday’s traffic accident? - Is it still on your desk? - OK! Bring it to the mess. There are some things to be checked.” He put down the phone, and beckoned Pierce and Michael to follow him. They walked through a row of containers behind the well-tanned, broad-shouldered major towards the mess. When they arrived there, Liz was already awaiting them.

“Here it is, sir,” she said, handing over the surprisingly thick report to the major, who passes it on to Michael.

“Cappuccino, I guess?” the major said.

“OK for me,” said Pierce.

“Nothing for me, please,” said Michael, who was browsing slowly through the report. It appeared to be written nearly, almost in the style of a scientific manuscript, with large margins and double spaced text.

Major Clancy stepped towards a large coffee machine, and pressed some buttons. Various sounds informed the persons present that the machine was doing a serious effort to produce a product that deserved the name cappuccino.

“Is this the only copy?” Michael then asked.

“What do you mean with that?” the major asked, with a suspicious scowl.

*‘A hopeless case’, Michael concluded in thought. ‘That report must be as sound as a rock, and we are in big trouble.’* Courteously he handed it back to the

major. It was on that moment that Michael noticed the major's ring, which he kept singularly on his right hand.

"May I have a look at that *ring*, please?" said Michael.

"I beg your pardon?" the major said, now with even more indignation.

"I recognise it!" said Michael. "Come and have a look, Pierce," beckoning in Pierce's direction.

Pierce stepped over, and said: "But Michael, that's your *snake* ring!"

"Oh, you *recognise* this, do you?" the major said.

"Yes, it was once mine, but I disposed of it... in Bristol," Michael said.

"Well, well, what a coincidence! That is where I found it, in Bristol, indeed!" said the major.

"I guess you found it in a building pit in the front of the building of Inventura Plc," Michael asked.

"Exactly! Just as you say! Good development firm, by the way. Came up with lots of good products for the US Army," said major Clancy.

"I worked there for quite a long time, actually," said Michael, "on the biopolymer department!"

"Great, great, but then I suppose you should have your ring back!" said the major jovially, "After I found it I just kept it as a souvenir, but it's only silver, so..." He was already tugging at his ring, but he found that it was strongly resisting to be removed. "Blimey," he scolded. "I remove it nearly every day, but now it just won't give an inch." He tugged even harder, but then screamed. "Shit!! This hurts!" Major Clancy raised his finger, and a small stream of blood was already dripping from his finger.

It was then that Michael thought he could make good use of his new treasure: the *amalgam stone*, as he called it. It was the result of many months of careful fermenting of the chemicals he had taken from the cellar of his former working place. Being very red of mercuric sulphide, and stabilised by purified clay and some other compounds he had included in the composition, Michael was almost sure he could do something good with it, having experimented with the recipe for quite a while.

“Just keep it steady,” Michael said. “This will remove it.” He had lifted the egg-shaped stone out of his pocket, and brought it in contact with the ring, and after a little rubbing, the whole ring dissolved into the stone, not leaving a trace, and even curing the little wound on the major’s finger.

“Ah! Great!” he said. “One of your new innovations, I gather. I always thought that wound-healing would leap forward one day. Jolly good work!”

“Thanks for the complement, major,” said Michael. He threw up the stone, and caught it again, but then it slipped out of his hand – because the stone was always a bit moist and slippery – and then it bounced onto a table. Before he could take it up again, the stone suddenly started to change shape. First it spread on the table as a small pancake, but then various things started to bulge out of the surface. At least a dozen snake heads suddenly rose out of the flat structure, attentively looking around, and a pungent sulphurous fume spread through the mess.

“Holy Shit!!” the major exclaimed. Pierce and Michael stood frozen to the floor. *‘We are in very, very big trouble,’* Michael suddenly realised, and Pierce’s thoughts were similar. Next they observed that the whole snake structure was growing larger, and it was at the same time consuming the metal dining table it was lying on. The major, however, was a man of action, who had seen the most impossible scenes during his long career in the army. He ran towards the other side of the officer’s mess, and took hold of two large axes, which had been hanging there. They had been found a few days after the start of the METFOR operation somewhere in the desert and had become their icon. Now, a few months later, the major thought that they could be of good use.

“This will stop ‘m,” the major roared and he ran towards the ever growing shape of ferocious snakes that were making their way towards other delicious metal tables. The stroke of the first axe made the colony of snakes jump from the table flat onto the wall, with the axe still sticking in the middle. The second axe was swung by the major towards the bunch of

snakes and crashed into the middle of its vibrating belly beside the first axe.

“That’ll teach ‘m!” major Clancy yelled, thinking he was master of the situation. Unfortunately, the combination of Abraxyne with primary matter, augmented with the fiery metal of the axes of Anathor was a most unfortunate chemical experiment. For only about ten seconds it appeared that the enemy had been stalled, but then new life sprang into it. The two metal blades melted into the body of the monster, and the collection of snakes bundled together into three huge snakes, more like dragons in appearance. They hissed forebodingly and started to eat into the metal wall of the officer’s mess. The wooden shafts of the axes were spitted out, and had caught fire. Further augmentation in this environment was ensured, because nearly everything was made out of metal. An enormous heat issued from the monster, as if it had turned into a steel works. All paper and wood caught fire, and Michael and Pierce, a moment ago nailed to the ground, were now forced to withdraw to the other end of the officer’s mess. Major Clancy had already leapt out of the door to get heavier artillery. Pierce and Michael were trying to get to the door, but instead crowded in a corner farthest away from the ancient monster. In such position they would have been an easy prey, but suddenly two women entered. A tingling sound was heard, and the strong summons of a woman in a strange language. The three snakes proceeded from the wall toward the middle of the room, and for a while stood staring at the intruders: two feeble women, evidently not afraid at all, one of which was incessantly shaking a sistrum. The snakes coiled around each other, and drilled through the floor. Then major Clancy appeared, with a bunch of other soldiers, all armed with sturdy machine guns. “Where is it, that Gorgon!” he shouted.

“Gone, you knobhead!” Maria scolded. “Better get the fire hose, instead of these useless guns.”

Major Clancy now realised that the monster had indeed disappeared from the premises, and that there was a threatening fire raging, many plastic chairs and a large cupboard being on fire, and giving off choking fumes. The army men ran out and came back with fire extinguishers. The carbon dioxide did a good job, and within a minute the fire was put down. In the middle of the chilly white powder, they all noticed a huge hole in the floor. Looking down, they observed a large tunnel that ensued under the building, going straight down into the earth.

“What the Hell was *that*?” the major asked.

“An ancient monster, called Pytho, not quite a Gorgon,” said Maria. “And this *kenobhead*, this *idiot of idiots*, has taken care of its *resurrection!*” she screamed pointing at Michael.

“I have done *what*?” said Michael, who crawled with Pierce out of the far corner.

“*Think*, you, fool!” Maria raged on.

“I just thought it would disappear, if I dissolved it in mercury, as an amalgam.”

“Well, you obviously thought erroneously!” said Maria. “Remember that John tried to *warn* us, about these axes, and have you not read about Abraxas? The monster of the underworld, the octopus with a thousand tentacles, the winged serpent of madness, the hermaphrodite of the lowest beginning?”

“What’s this, ladies?” said major Clancy. “You know more of this affair?”

“Not something you would understand,” said Sheila. The major, however, wasn’t easily put off.

“I beg your pardon ma’am, but we had a critical situation here! I saw what I saw, and heard what I heard!” the major yelled. “This should be reported!”

“As I noticed, one of your reports has already burnt,” said Michael.

“Nobody will believe you,” said Pierce.



“Now, the simple thing we came for was my father. Are you going to give clearance for my father to be buried in Scotland, and give rest to his soul, or are you going to write more useless reports?” Maria said, menacingly lifting the sistrum before the major’s eyes.

“OK, OK,” major Clancy mumbled, taking a step backwards and lifting his hands in the air, “We’ll see to the victim’s transfer as soon as we can, if you keep this monster away.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. This creature will be dealt with by higher powers, and hereby I don’t refer to the US military,” said Maria.

After giving all the possible information that the major had needed for filling out his forms, the party left, and the three army trucks of the METFOR returned to the Abbey late in the evening.

Although Sheila had planned to go to sleep early, as she was at the end of the day quite exhausted, she decided to examine Michael thoroughly about his alchemistic experiments. Michael was still in awe of what he had caused, and gave a detailed account. Sheila then decided to visit Maria to find out how she suddenly knew things nobody knew, and to get some answers to her unexpected behaviour. She walked over to the room of the Ferraris couple.

After a short knock, Marco opened the door. “Hullo there! What has happened? Maria is in all states.”

“She has a bit of explaining to do,” said Sheila. She moved inside, and saw Maria lying on her bed with a cold compress on her forehead.

“Oh, hello again,” Maria said with a faint voice.

“Well, that was an interesting show today,” said Sheila “What have you been up to, giving us all a surprise like that?!”

“I’m sorry,” said Maria, “I didn’t plan this, you know. Until today I also didn’t know anything, but now...”

“What do you mean?” asked Sheila.

“I saw a strange vision,” said Maria. “I can’t really tell what happened. It was incomprehensible... confusing, many things at the same time.”

“How did you know about Michael, about Sheena’s stable and the stone?”

“I’ve been shown many things. I was almost two months away,” said Maria.

“You haven’t got sunstroke, have you?” asked Marco, who was genuinely concerned.

Maria rose abruptly, threw the cold compress in Marco’s face, and hissed: “Sit over there, and keep quiet!” Marco then knew it was time to withdraw, as he never saw such fervent flames in his wife’s eyes.

“But why take this stone with him, all the way to Damascus?” Maria continued.

“He somehow found it difficult to part with,” Sheila explained.

“Due to your husband we are now forced to go to Delphi.”

“Weren’t we going there already?” Sheila said.

“We hadn’t any reason to go there at all. It would have been a complete hoax, but now that Pytho has been brought to life, things are different,” said Maria. “How did Michael get these axes?”

“He said he hadn’t noticed them before the major dashed at them... They just appeared out of the blue!”

“Now everything has happened that shouldn’t have happened,” Maria explained. “We were too late. Delphi is now a very dangerous place.”

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## PART III

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*The Pythia and the Tripod*

## 8. From the Scrolls of Democritus

❧ *Interludium tertium* ❧

### I



Hippocrates was after a good night's sleep somewhat restless. When we ate a little in the early morning, he asked me about the Asclepeion at Hermopolis, and I managed to confirm that the new temple of Imhotep was completed. Space at the old library was now getting limited, because in addition to the writings of Lord Hermes many new treatises had been deposited, including some small works by myself on *Alchimica*. I had even been consulted for construction of a new library at Pharos. After our little morning bite, I showed him all the new instruments I had gathered in my laboratory and my newest inventions. It was then that he informed me he was anxious to return to Kos.

"It seems you are doing well, and digging quite deeply into the secrets of Nature. Maybe even you could find some help from the writings of Parmenides, or perhaps this Ring. I think I should leave you in peace, now that I found you to be quite healthy and wealthy."

"Sorry to hear you are suddenly in such a hurry," I remarked. "As for my health and wealth, my noble friend, they have seen better times. Just imagine what fortune would be needed to investigate every aspect of Nature, how everything is formed out of the atoms, and how everything operates, the transformations and transmutations in the micro-cosmos and the macro-cosmos. Surely, all the gold of Midas and all the riches of Croesus will not be sufficient to obtain the ultimate *Wisdom of Nature*."

"Unless civilisation further grows and allows more people to partake in the endeavour of acquiring knowledge," Hippocrates rebutted.

"But, as I said once before, it is *impossible* to fathom all properties of the things that surround us, or to reduce everything to simple models, and

then, who would grow our crops, and who would bake our bread? My dear Hippocrates, we would *starve* in the process!”

“A critical question, which yet again makes me wonder why you need, and in fact, have claimed, all this money for these investigations, which - as you say - are in the end all *folly*!”

“Are you perhaps here to *tease* me?” I asked.

“No, my friend, but you know I like to poke into logical inconsistencies of the mind! And in the end, this problem of the limits of scientific investigations is not the problem of our beloved Greece, is it?”

“No, but it may become a problem of later civilisations.”

“You mean of the Romans?”

“Likely, or of the New Atlanteans, of which Socrates has spoken.”

“You may be right, but I still do not follow some of the things you have taught me about this,” said Hippocrates suddenly rising from his seat, and starting to saunter through the room. “On the one hand you state that all is reason, that the soul is reason, all is mind, but on the other hand you say that there is no truth, or at least the truth doesn’t show itself. It seems to me an inconsistent pair of statements. Is there truth or not?”

“I said that we are separated from reality. It is because of the difference between the truth of the *Spirit*, and the truth of the *Mind*, the difference between the *Higher Law* and the *lower laws*. Lord Hermes taught me that, although the whole truth about all phenomena and all planes of life cannot be known by man even in his highest reason, all statements of logic and reason must be treated as real, as a truth. He called it the divine paradox, and it is the only paradox we should willingly accept. Never believe anybody who claims to know the truth. It’s the unsure mind that most of all claims to have found the truth. We know *nothing*.”

“So, the Universe is nothing more than atoms combining and recombining, and moving around in a void, and that it is all we can say about it?”

“Of course, when we dwell on the plane of matter, matter appears to us as matter, comprising the atoms and the void. However, it is also true that we live and move and have our being in the ALL, emergent from the Mind of the ALL, the Great Creator, and that the universe is pure wholeness, indivisible and a continuous unfolding in time and space. This was the main point of our teachings, which I tried to develop further with Anaxagoras. He also knew that all is connected, that in everything there is a share of everything.”

“You mean to say that we think *wrongly* about Nature?”

“Clearly so! We connect things that cannot be connected, and separate things that are inseparable.”

“Maybe there are new things to be learned, if we could design new instruments for studying the atoms, how they combine, or when we can fathom the secrets of the universe with even stronger telescopes as the Arabians have built,” Hippocrates commented.

“I’m afraid this will take much time and effort, and these would be very strange instruments. Still, all the problems in our dealings with our fellow men will continue, unless we understand the principle of the ALL.”

“I would advise you not to trouble your mind with issues that are for future generations: you still have your own tasks to fulfil. Still, I wonder what use there is of all this philosophy, when the ultimate truth is unknowable anyway. At least your Alchemy experiments look much more useful to me.” With these words he lifted his bundle of goods, gave me a firm hug, and walked out of the door.

## II

After Hippocrates had left, I retreated in my study, and was suddenly eager to read the papers of Parmenides that Hippocrates had left with me. I wondered if it would help me to rekindle my faith in philosophy. I embarked on a few long days of reading, and recognised many of the teachings of Parmenides in his long poem, which was in many parts

familiar. Still, I kept wondering at Hippocrates' last words, whether I was not deceiving myself, and I heard the words of Lord Hermes again reverberating in my ears concerning the Axiom of Rhythm: *'The creation and destruction of worlds, the rise and fall of nations; the life span of all things, and finally the mental state of Man all conform to this principle... yes, even great philosophies and creeds.'*” It was said that Heraclitus haughtily claimed he knew everything, but I surmised that in the end he must have arrived at the same bitter conclusion: that all philosophy is quite useless, and it was most unnerving that it had to be my own pupil, Hippocrates, who had pointed this out to me. Was I, who was known as the *Laughing Philosopher*, now in danger of also becoming a *Weeping Philosopher* in my last days? Would it not be better to pierce my eyes, as I was obviously blind all my life for a truth I didn't want to see? There was a great emptiness growing within me: the desert of my soul lay barren before me ever more clearly, and I felt impelled to put everything to the test: I took up the Ring, and examined it. A snake with emerald eyes, a grey belly; an instrument of treachery, perhaps? I put it aside, back into its glass container and in the wooden box. I still had my reservations about the Ring. It didn't look all too neat in its dull, grey coat.

After visiting Laertes for supper, I returned home still in a distressed state of mind, and I considered whether the Ring would have anything to say. I opened the little box, took it out of its shelter, and placed it in a wineglass with a golden rim, filling the glass with some strong white wine, and I waited a while.

Then I asked a feeble question: “I need help. Are you able to advise me?” Almost immediately a voice rose out of the glass.

*“I am the one you have sought for.  
I will show you a cherished treasure.  
A golden fountain and a silver spring  
from the word of God  
and the Soul of Humanity.*

The voice was reassuring. “Who are you and from where have you come?” I asked. The voice replied:

*I was baptised Sun and Moon by Hermes,  
and Aphrodite bestowed me  
with the fieriness of the Red Lion  
and the cunning of the Green Lion.  
I am only One Substance,  
the Earth Element,  
fused from minerals and metals,  
both hot and cold, both wet and dry.  
I'm called Hermaphrodite by many.  
Still, it does not matter what the common men call me,  
for I am only One Substance, not two.*

After these slightly confusing words, I asked: “Your former master Hippocrates could have used you well. Why were you silent to him, and did not advise him?” The voice answered:

*I only appear to those to whom I have been sent.  
Only will I open the seven gates to him  
who has climbed the seven mountains,  
and brought home the seven metals,  
then understood the seven stars.  
Still, I am the greatest Treasure,  
Yet, I am also a poisonous dragon,  
A furious lion with jaws that open like an abyss.  
All metals bow before me;  
When I grab them, they bust into pieces.  
Smelter fumes have I been named,  
I smoulder an evil poison.*



*Yet, when from poison I am freed,  
through art and craft of hand,  
then I may cure both man and beast,  
for dire disease often direct them;  
but prepare me correctly, and take great care  
that you faithfully guard me;  
for else I am poison, and poison remain,  
that pierces the heart of many.*

I didn't follow the meaning and I asked further; "What then is thy composition, form and nature? How am I to prepare you?" The voice said:

*My essence is two-fold:  
White Mercury:  
valuable, powerful as Mars,  
gold-devouring,  
and Yellow Sulphur:  
savage, smoky and poisonous  
solid, liquid and gaseous.  
I am of four elements,  
all sealed within me:  
Air, Fire, Water and Earth.  
In me is the Water of the fountain of the Cave of Treasures.  
It flows within me, dry water, subtle and pure,  
the waters of remembrance, forgetfulness and redemption.  
It wets nothing, yet it is the Seed of all Humidity.  
It is the consort of the Green Lion,  
tempered by the nature of Mars.  
My nutrients will be shed,  
the male part solid,  
and the female part, liquid.*

*They dissolve, putrefy, absorb,  
crystallise, coagulate,  
and thus my golden Child re-appears.  
The child immediately repeats the Work,  
until everything flourishes.'*

“By Apollo!” I shouted. “I cannot follow all this nonsense! Can you not help me in a *practical* way?” The ring answered:

*I am the good unicorn of the ancients.  
Dissociate me into two,  
And then bond us back together,  
So that my mortal remains no longer decompose.  
That is how to get the most powerful medicine.  
Pay no attention to my wild and poisonous nature,  
Because, God willing,  
I cure all ailments and give long life.*

My confidence grew. I contemplated that Hippocrates might have benefitted very well from this ring, which he had kept so long, but was unable to employ. I wondered whether the ring would allow itself to be tested, and concluded that it clearly asked to be dissected. I collected one of my strongest scalpels from my pantry, and put the ring on top of my small table. I cut it in three little pieces, and with great astonishment I saw that the three pieces became alive, and bonded together out of themselves to form a little serpent. It crawled a little while around on the table, and then it bit its own tail again, and came to rest in its original form. Clearly impressed I placed it back inside the glass and asked: “Can you show me what I am to do to cure myself?”

The voice answered:

*Seek after reason and intelligence,  
And do not look down on me,  
Though I am vile and small,  
Nothing else in the entire world  
Contains the true Tincture,  
Since I have the subtle and pure Mercury,  
Settled, without turbulence,  
Completely liquid, yet white and clear.*

Yet not fully understanding, but getting convinced that the ring held a certain secret, I asked: “In which way do you propose to help me?”

It answered:

*A king in purple robes stabilizes me each time:  
That is the pure Gold of the Philosophers  
Who seek It in me.  
It is called Solid Red Sulphur.  
Everything else keeps a wide berth,  
Because I can do it all single-handed,  
Though I am only one Stone,  
I tolerate no Silver or Gold,  
And Mercury treats me with disdain.  
I complete the entire Work  
All by Myself.*

I felt there was a strong voice of confidence, speaking to me with the languages of all my previous Masters. I wondered whether it was not merely the echo of my late wife, forcing her ancient Chaldean lore on me, to which I had always showed firm resistance. Still, it was as if it wanted me to embark on something practical. “How should I start?” I asked.

The voice spoke as follows:

*Here the Work begins,  
A duality gives the power to heal,  
The elixir of long life.  
A duality separated by a moist fire,  
Bestowing health and wealth.  
Behold the Figure I will show to thee.*

Here I wondered what would happen, whether something would be shown to me, and indeed the Ring transformed itself, and assumed the shape of a Sun, with an inverted Moon on top. The voice said:

*Do not pollute me,  
Just dissolve me, coagulate me,  
And turn me upside down.  
That is how to do the Good Work.  
When Sun and Moon with Mercury  
Are Joined together,  
Indivisible and fireproof,  
An eternal splendour occurs.  
But, you must know and understand  
The second figure I will show to thee.*

At this stage the symbols of the Sun and the Moon remained, but now the Sun was placed in a sealed flask, and the Moon was placed beneath it. The voice said:

*All work will be in vain  
In this mysterious art,  
If mundane Moon and Mercury  
Entice you from the Path.*

*Mystical Moon and Mercury  
Is another name for one's Nature:  
Mystical Fire is the Fiery Water,  
In which the Mystical Moon  
and Sun are cremated.*

I became aware that the Ring was showing me a process of transmutation that could be done in practice, but that it required great patience. The ring said concerning this process:

*Dissolve me gently,  
With no water or powder.  
Place me in a moist coffin.  
I turn white and red,  
Then bubble forth a spring,  
Fair as the Moon,  
bright as the Sun.*

Moist warmth was provided to the flask by the moon, which now assumed the form of warm, fermenting dung in a dark box, while symbols of the four elements surrounded it. The grey substance in the flask slowly became black, like a process of putrefaction. Then it turned red. I said: "I think I understand. What is the next stage?" The Ring answered:

*Next I will show you the power of the Liquid Fire:  
Cooking and melting Solid into liquid.  
Fire which slays the Sun and Moon  
then Resurrects them.  
Then the four elements turn Solid red:  
The Lesser Work gives way to the  
Birth of the child of the sun.*

*The black raven grows  
For those who are able to  
Stop the fire, and be patient,  
Until the colours appear.*

The Ring in the flask assumed yet another form, that of a phoenix, holding a sceptre and a royal orb. Sun and Moon were still present and exerting their influence from a distance. The ring explained the following stage:

*Your first task is controlling this faculty:  
Turn our virgin Earth into Milk,  
but be Gentle and take as long as a pregnancy.  
Then the raven is born,  
later shown as the peacock,  
In five months, lilies will bloom  
When you decide to open the door for him.  
Thus, now it whitens and has the power to  
Transmute lead, tin, copper, and Mercury  
Into the finest Silver, blessed be.*

Suddenly a great darkness filled the bottle, as if it were imbued with ink. This was not what I had expected to see. “Surely, you will show me the end, and the transmutation into *gold*,” I asked impatiently. It was already late in the evening, however, and the voice remained silent. There was no word even after repeated enquiring. Thus there was nothing else for me left to do but to dispose the black liquor, which was like a noxious serpent’s venom, into the garden. I poured it in a corner that flourished with weeds, and the serpent Ring I placed back into its safe box.

### III

Three days had passed, and I couldn't get my sleep. I was tormented and restless. Thus I laboured in my workshop to lift my mind, trying to get the process the Ring had shown me right. Of course it was of no avail.

Then in the evening Laertes appeared on my doorstep with a sad expression on his face. "What is wrong?" I asked. "You look as if you are in mourning."

"For you I am in mourning, Democritus, my dear friend," he spoke softly, looking down at the floor.

"What is it? I beg you, tell me!"

"It is Socrates," said Laertes. Further he said nothing, but lifted a small paper from his pocket.

"Has he written to you?" I asked.

"No, it is a short note from my Roman friend Cassius. He informed me that Socrates has been sentenced to death, and was forced to take poison."

All my blood seemed to chill in my veins. I staggered, and Laertes came instantly to my help. "Steady, my friend," he said.

"He is dead then?" I said with a trembling voice.

"Unfortunately so. The wisest of the Greek, he has fallen."

"Fallen... Socrates..." I stammered. "And the Gods? They did *nothing*? Athena didn't come to his help?"

"Even the Gods are helpless when confronted with human trickery, it seems."

"This can't be!" I commented. "This is the end of Greece! When did this tragedy take place?"

"Socrates died in the evening at sunset, three days ago."

"The black poison," I stammered, realising the incident three nights earlier.

"Come, Democritus," said Laertes, "Let us drink to our sorrow. I have some good red wine suitable for the occasion."

I was unable to speak, and followed Laertes to his tavern. He was one of the last friends I had in this place, and my mind was in turmoil. *'Is there such a thing as justice? This cannot be...'* my mind endlessly repeated.

It was a long, silent evening, and the death of Socrates had spread in Abdera. Some other people joined the crowd to mourn. I raised my glass, and spoke words of honour to the Man who the Pythia had crowned the wisest among the Greeks. Now he was no more.

That night I slept well, and new plans rose. As if the spirit of Socrates had come to me, and appointed me as his successor, I rose steadily to my feet. The only answer now would lie in Delphi. I decided to return to my earlier notion that I might visit Delphi and ask the Pythia about the future of humanity. As it was said that the strength of prophesy depends on the value, and particularly the *personal* value, of the votive offering, I next considered what I could bring to Delphi's treasury. It was almost instantly clear that it had to be my father's helmet. Not completely made of gold, but rather from gilded iron, it was a great treasure, from which I could never have parted, but presently everything looked bleak, and empty. I packed a bagful of food stuff for the way, wrapped the helmet in a white cloth, and carefully locked up my house. Lots of gold coins I also took, and the Ring I neatly put in my pocket. In the village I visited my cousin, who had been always faithful to me, and I gave him my keys and a considerable amount of golden coins. I said I was travelling to Delphi, and that I would be away for at least a month. He looked worried, but was happy to take up the responsibility. Our old mansion is big, and needed to be protected.

Thus, I set out to Delphi already the same day, giving some extra money to Laertes when I passed by his tavern, so that he would be safe again for some time. From him I received a precious bottle of wine for the road. Thus, my new expedition started, which brought me first to Delphi, but that was only the start of many undertakings. I joined a group of pilgrims to the West, of which a considerable part was headed for Delphi



too. In their safe company I was soon recognised, and I found many eager ears. Still, I felt as if I was a sophist, and ended with the warning that people always should keep their reserve, and not take *anything* as the final truth. Arrival in Delphi was at the right time. The Pythian games had just been completed a week earlier, and the big crowds had left, but still eminent people could be found there. I was eager to enter the shrine, and conversed long with the successor of Menander, Ammonius, about my desperate state. He also said he was sorry to hear the terrible news of Socrates, and finally advised me to proceed and line up for the Pythia, who was expected to arrive the next day.

That day was extremely hot, the air at Delphi being tense, trapped by the surrounding mountains. Still there were many that stood in queue. As the air was biting and penetrating, the gold of the helmet, which I donated into one the Gygian bowls at the entrance, had started to peel off. Still, I knew the offering was good. My question was scribbled on a little note, and Ammonius sat on the impressive throne of Midas, as if he was a king himself. I presented him my short and simple question: “Great Apollo, lord and mediator of the Gods, Hear my plead, consider my sorrow, and look upon the despair of your faithful servant, who has come from Abdera to learn the fate of Greece, and what is to become of humanity. After all that has been achieved in Greece, our country is on the brink of dissolution. Even the wisest among us, Socrates, has now fallen. If this is to ensue after all our efforts, what is there left for humanity to achieve?”

Ammonius nodded in my direction: “A pertinent question, surely. I just wonder whether the Pythia will be able to give an answer you did not come up with yourself. Wait here!” He rose from the chair, and disappeared in a small corridor leading to the Pythian chamber. He came back quite soon, and said: “The Pythia will see you personally, as is her wish.” He stepped outside and informed the other pilgrims: “The shrine is closed for today. Come back tomorrow. The Pythia is unwell.” He returned, and together we stepped into the *sanctum sanctorum* of the shrine at Delphi.

The Pythia was seated on the high Tripod, in a very humble, white outfit. The chamber was filled with a sweet, mildly sulphurous smell, and there was a beam of sunlight shining in through the ceiling. Under her seat the crafted heads of the serpent family were visible.

“Sit down here,” the Pythia said, “I have been foretold of your coming, and only give the answer to your question in private. These are no common questions, especially for a philosopher of your repute. Truly, I am also shocked by the news of Socrates, but how are the Gods to know the Fate of Humanity? The Gods have only *created* humanity, and given the simple rule to follow: Worship the Gods, and cherish thy neighbour, give only the best to God and neighbour. Have you not obeyed this rule?”

“I think I did, but how can I be sure?”

“Then I think you have a task before you. Apply to yourself the rules you have been teaching, and come again later.”

“You have no answer? Why is this?” I asked.

“Of course the Gods know the *ultimate* fate of humanity, surely, but is this what you want to know? New civilisations will arise. All things have their life span, also the golden epoch of our beloved Greece, and unfortunately, this is the end, as we both know.”

“Is all this strife for fair rule and justice then in vain?”

“The fate of mankind is inevitable. The choice man has is how he arrives at it, in shame or in dignity. Live in harmony and understanding of each other’s needs; that is the way to arrive at the final scene in a respectable way.”

“And that final scene is?” I pressed.

“Can you not even make an educated guess?” asked the Pythia.

“By water... by fire?”

“No, Democritus, by starvation.”

“Starvation? You mean lack of food?”

“Exactly, as every living species, the end is starvation, and we are no exception. No water, no food. I think you know this yourself.”

“The dream of Laertes...” Democritus mumbled.

“Well... there we are! Now, Democritus, return home; you are much needed in your beloved Abdera.”

“I think you are wrong on this point, my dear Pythia. They want to see the last of me.”

The Pythia shook her head, and said: “Try to look at it from their side: you are a rich land-owner, and they have all become poor, and have lost their means of living from the land. The pyramid has been standing on its head. Now it has collapsed.”

“Starvation,” I stammered, and tried to recall the dream I had heard from Laertes. I had forgotten all about the importance of land ownership. I had supported the keeper of a tavern, who supplies good food, which few can afford, and forgotten where all the food came from. I felt as having been punched on the nose. Was it not because of my hidden fear of famine that I supported Laertes?

“Why did the Gods not act on behalf of Socrates?” I asked.

“Maybe those days are over when the Gods walked amongst us. Were you not a pupil of Lord Hermes once?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“His ancestors were Gods, and they were great teachers.”

“Tehut, his grandfather, at least was... and Osiris. As you say, they were the great teachers, who travelled to all parts of the world,” I confirmed.

“The greatest Muse of all, Mnemosyne, the Titan once also taught the human race, quite in the beginning, when Man was still a beast. She taught them above all hunting and husbandry... Art and handicraft as well.”

“What do you imply? They are all gone now.”

“You can do us a great service, Democritus, and bring to Delphi the cist of Cybele. Maybe then we will get some answers.”

“Where is it to be found?”

“Where exactly, I don’t know, but I would start in Phrygia. The locals call it the *place of guidance*, where Cybele gave counsel in ancient times, unclosing great truths, as I do here now.”

“You require me to rest an expedition?”

“You have the means, and have travelled to far lands before. You shouldn’t disappoint me, Democritus.”

“Did the Gods not burn the Temple of Cybele many years ago?”

“Indeed, if we may believe the tale of the Etruscans that one of the followers of Heraclitus burnt the temple at Sardis, but remember that it was Cybele, the daughter of King Meones of Phrygia, who married Jasius, the keeper of the Mysteries of Demeter. They had a child, whom they called Corybas. When Jasius died, Dardanus, Cybele and Corybas brought the mysteries of the mother of the Gods to Phrygia. They erected a small temple, and Cybele called the goddess after herself, and Corybas called her attending priests the Corybantes. They had in custody a great book of secrets, of which we could learn about the fate of humanity. Thus, you should set course for Phrygia. Now, go, and bring me the great trophy!”

Thus I took my leave of Delphi, and entered on my toilsome sojourn into Persia.

## 9.

# The Throne of Midas

~ Citrinitas ~

*This Gyges was the first of the Barbarians within our knowledge who dedicated votive offerings at Delphi, except only Midas the son of Gordias, king of Phrygia, who dedicated for an offering the royal throne on which he sat before all to decide causes, and this throne - a sight worth seeing - stands in the same place with the bowls of Gyges.*

*Herodotus, The Histories*

### 1



At about the same time of the day when Michael and Pierce were approaching the METFOR base, Richard McGregor and Benjamin Miller had their audience with King Hamid of Phrygia. They were welcomed in an unexpectedly new, modern palace in Gordianum, in the *Blue Room*, which was called so, because it looked like a huge swimming hall, sumptuously decorated in blue and white ceramic tiles. However, there was no swimming pool; instead you could almost swim around in the most stylish furniture and artwork you could ever imagine. And it was all surprisingly European.

“Please, gentlemen, let’s sit down over there.” Hamid pointed to a sitting corner where he took place in a chair that Richard recognised as the *Blue Chair* by the Finnish architect and interior designer Eliel Saarinen. Benji and Richard took seat on a long settee of the same design.

“Here we can speak quite undisturbed,” King Hamid said with a gentle smile.

“Let us directly come to the point, your Majesty: We are here for an urgent matter, which in some sense requires a small sacrifice, but which could be also of great use to you,” said Richard.

“I wonder what this could be, because I do not remember ever having made your acquaintance, but as it seems you come in the presence of my good friend Benjamin Miller, I suppose I will have to listen to your proposal.”

Richard opened his valise, and took out a thick envelope, and handed it over to the gravely looking King Hamid.

“And what is this then?” he asked.

“Pictures of ancient treasures, your Majesty. Ever heard of the Oracle of Delphi?” Richard asked.

“Sure, who do you think I am; an ignorant barbarian?” the King shouted, clearly somewhat offended, “I’ve had *some* education in ancient history!”

“Of course, Sire. I didn’t want to insinuate anything, only introduce our subject. But we know you are interested in reconciliation of the various faiths in the World, and in such an endeavour, you might be inclined to help our cause.”

“So, you are here to make some sort of... *bargain*?”

“I have the conviction you will not see it as a bargain at all, Sire,” said Richard.

“I surely hope so otherwise I might be forced to put you in prison for a while.”

“I’m already quite used to living in prison, Sire,” said Richard. “Your friend here has seen to that.”

“What does he mean, Benji?” Hamid asked, frowning in the former inspector’s direction.

“It has nothing to do with our issue, Sire,” Benji said. “He is one of my ex-convicts, indeed, but he has sat his time in gaol, and we are now together advancing an important mission: we are trying to resurrect the Oracle of Delphi.”

“Oh!! I heard of this!” Hamid said with an instant sunny shade over his face. “Our Greek Ambassador has spoken of this a few weeks ago. But, I mean, this is only some sort of silly game... for the tourists... Is it not?”

“Well, it might appear so, but we are actually quite serious about it,” said Richard.

“Awfully strange: Two British citizens endeavouring to blow new life into the Oracle at Delphi. Do you intend to return to the Greeks all the historical trinkets you have stowed away in your so-called *British Museum*?”

“Partly, yes,” said Richard.

“Ah... and have you already found your precious Pythia? An elder virgin? Must be hard to find nowadays!!” Hamid said teasingly.

“The Pythia is, indeed, one of the more difficult points, Sire, but you might do something more straightforward yourself: you could make an important donation,” said Richard.

“I suppose I could make a donation, if you can really get the Oracle speaking again. But tell me: why do you think I would be so interested in what the Oracle has to say. We have our Holy Scriptures, of Moses, Jesus, Mohammed. I listen rather to these teachings than make offerings to the Pagan God Apollo.”

“We have the conviction that many Jewish, Christian and Muslim people might be interested to hear what the Oracle has to say.”

“About the *Fate of Mankind*, you mean?”

“Exactly! The world has changed since the days of Mohammed.”

“True, there was still the Bahá'u'lláh I forgot to mention! All the same, there's an interesting point! So, what exactly do you want from me?”

“We have been trying to locate the Throne of Midas, Sire.”

“The Throne of Midas? You mean the Royal Throne?”

“Well, it has come to our knowledge that it is in your personal possession. If you care to look at these pictures we gave you a bit more closely...”

King Hamid again raised his thick eye-brows, and opened the envelope, throwing a suspicious glance at his strange guests. He found a whole bunch of pictures there, and browsed them through very slowly and attentively. "Well - Allah is Great - this is absolutely amazing! I knew that this Royal Throne is very old, and that it was the actual throne of King Midas, but that it was used in the temple of Delphi I must have missed somehow." For a while he sat there, and then he asked: "What do you know about this connection?"

"Well, your Majesty, it is truly so that Midas, nearly at the end of his life, donated his throne to Delphi. The whole city of Delphi was crammed with treasures, all kinds of offerings and trophies. The Oracle was held in such high regard that many Kings donated treasures, and in return they got very dire advice in matters of state, marriage, war, crops, you name it."

"And now you are trying to retrieve the most important artefacts from the Royal houses from all places in the world, do I guess right?"

"Yes, Sire! We've already retrieved most of it. And now we are still tracking down some other important key objects. The Throne of Midas we see as a very significant donation; that is... if your Majesty is ready to part with it, at least for some time," Richard explained.

"You mean that I could merely *lend* it to you?"

"In practice it would be a loan, and not to us, but to the Greek government. We expect that they wouldn't keep the Oracle in action long, Sire," said Richard.

"Why not?"

"There is only a very limited amount of people interested to consult the Pythia, Sire."

"Really? Do you think so? I disagree on that. I might be interested to hear what she has to say myself, although I am not really convinced that the Oracle can be brought back. And was it not so that the Pythia was sitting on some sort of snake-chair, with three snakes winding around it?"

"The Tripod, Sire!"



“Indeed! So, now I don’t understand, gentlemen. My throne is just a normal chair, a golden one, true, with two lions at the end of the armrest, and some rather staggering artwork at the backrest, but it is not the tripod, isn’t it?”

“No, Sire, the Throne is intended for the interpreter, who sits in the Hall of Offerings. He is the person that scribes down the questions of the pilgrims and other visitors consulting the Oracle. After this, he goes to the Pythia to hear her answers, and then he writes down her words, and he returns to his Throne and explains the oracle to the visitor. Nobody actually gets to *see* the Pythia.”

“Oh. I see... What a pity... and what are *these*?” Hamid asked showing them a picture of the Bowls of Gyges.

“They were golden dishes, donated by the Lydian King Gyges, into which money was collected in the temple.”

“Ah, they look impressive, and why did Gyges offer such golden bowls?”

“Gyges wanted advice from the Oracle too.”

“And what did this Gyges want to know?”

“Whether he would be safe on the throne of Lydia.”

“Hm... and why would he not be safe?”

“Well, Sire, he actually had murdered the former King, on demand of the former Queen, which he then took as his wife.”

“Oh... how cunning,” Hamid mumbled with a little twitch in his left eye, “... and what did the Oracle have to say to that?”

“That his deed would be avenged, but only five generations later.”

“Oh... and this came true?”

“Indeed, Sire, and this was one of the reasons the Oracle of Delphi got its great esteem, especially during the Greek golden age.”

“I’m slowly getting your point. Well... this is getting very interesting!” the King exclaimed. “So, you have found these offering bowls?”

“Indeed Sire, just a few months ago!”

“Ah... Where were they?”

“In Britain!”

“In a museum, I expect.”

“They were, but unfortunately some curator of a local country-museum had indirectly nicked them, already twenty-five years ago, and had used them as feeding bowls for the pigs.”

“The pigs... eating from golden bowls?” the King stammered.

“Indeed, Majesty,” said Richard.

King Hamid sat for a while silent, and then he started to laugh, silently, his belly shaking. “Well! This is the best joke I’ve ever heard!” he said.

“This isn’t a joke, Sire,” said Richard, “These pigs have literally been eating more than twenty years from golden bowls!”

King Hamid was laughing even harder. “You have made my day!!” he roared. “Well, as some have said: *‘Pigs are the philosophers of the Animal Kingdom’*, unclean, and always peeping in every corner to find the truth, leaving no stone unturned.”

“But why *unclean*, Sire,” asked Richard.

“These philosophers, they have no *faith*, they look for Allah in the Earth, while Allah is in Heaven... Do you get my point?”

“I think so, Sire,” said Richard.

Then the esteemed King briskly rose from his seat, and asked: “May I keep these pictures?”

“Of course, Majesty,” said Richard.

“The thing is that I cannot lend this throne, unless I can entirely trust you,” said Hamid. “You are still a complete stranger to me, mister McGregor, and a Scotsman.”

“I can vouch for him,” said Benji.

“This won’t help, Benji! As you said, he is one of your ex-convicts. What am I to think of this: You showing up with a former criminal?”

“He is reliable, I’m sure,” said Benji.

“What did he do?” asked Hamid.

“He was condemned for murder, or, to be more specific, involuntary manslaughter,” said Benji.

“How much years did you spend in gaol then?” asked Hamid.

“Ten years, Sire,” Richard duly.

“So little time? For killing somebody?” asked Hamid. “How can that be Benji?”

“We obey the Laws of our country, Sire. They are clear on that issue.”

“Ah, yes, but I suppose we have discussed about that more than once, did we, Benji? The Lockerbie bomber, for instance?”

“Well, he was, in the end, returned to Libya, Sire,” said Benji.

“Still, I don’t quite have confidence in two kinds of people: Jews and Scotsmen... The rest is quite OK. You know the little joke I always like to make about the Jew and the Scotsman fighting over a dime?”

“Yes, you told it more than once,” said Benji.

“Sorry, Sire, I do not recall any joke about Jews and Scotsmen,” asked Richard.

“Of course, excuse me,” said Hamid, “the Jew and the Scotsman fighting over a dime... They invented the copper wire... you see?”

A cunning smile appeared on Richard’s face and he felt the time was ripe to introduce his trump card.

“Have you ever met Jeremy Kemp, also a Scotsman?”

“Yes, yes, I was in business with him,” said King Hamid.

“I suppose it was this new arms deal with British Aerospace?” asked Richard.

“Indeed, how do you know?!” Hamid exclaimed.

“I know all about it! He was my cell mate for a while in Onley prison, and I think it would be the right opportunity to return to you a delicate document he had in his keeping,” said Richard. With that he opened his valise again and handed over a large brown envelope.

Benji suddenly got red in the face, “What the hell are you up to, McGregor?”

“Nothing special really, giving the King back what is his own,” said Richard.

Hamid opened the envelope, and read through the little paper. “Well, that is strange indeed!” said Hamid. “This is my original order for the air-to-ground missiles as the second part of the *Hunter* deal! It seems it was *accepted* by BAE!! What does this mean Benji? Didn’t you tell me that it was turned down by the government as an *illegal* transaction?”

“Indeed, this would have been a terrible scandal in the UK, surely,” Benji said hoarsely.

“But Kemp was the firm’s lawyer, and personally told me that there was nothing illegal about it! Then he suddenly disappeared, and nobody knew where he was! And there I was left with twenty five useless Hunter fighter planes, which cost me half of my Kingdom. What is your role in this matter Benji?”

Benji was broodingly silent and developed a blush. Richard was silent too, wisely so.

“You put him away, didn’t you?” asked Hamid.

“It was an *impossible* case!” Benji stammered. “In the political climate of that year it was a time bomb. Something had to be done about it.”

“So you put him away... *you... personally?*”

“I’m sorry Sire, I had no other options. The prime minister was breathing in my neck... and the Prince of Wales... *heavily.*”

Now Hamid got slowly out of his chair, and walked over to a writing desk. He opened a drawer, and dropped the paper inside. “Well, I suppose I can always issue the order again,” he said silently, “because *THE POLITICAL CLIMATE.*” he suddenly yelled, slamming his fist on the desk, and after the echoes had died out on the ceramic walls he returned to his calm voice: “...has so much improved.”

Hamid walked back to the two men, one had a face as a furnace, and the other displayed a sly grin on his face.

“Well, thanks to you, mister McGregor, I have come into the impossible situation that I might have to revise my opinion about the Scotsmen.” He took up the pile of pictures again of the treasures and walking around browsed them through. “So, I am allowed to keep these pictures?” he asked again.

“Of course, Majesty,” said Richard.

“Splendid!!” Hamid exclaimed. Then he shouted a few words to the guards at the door, and stepped towards the writing desk, where he dumped the pile of pictures of Delphi. He locked the drawer with a small key. He said: “COME! Follow me,” and begged his guests to follow him.

## 2

They all walked out of the blue room into a long corridor. At the end a large door could be seen, and when they had arrived there one of the guards opened it. It gave entry to a huge hall of which the sheer richness could not even be overshadowed by the interior of the Saint Isaac’s cathedral in St. Petersburg, with lapis lazuli shining from every wall and gold from every corner.

“I suppose Benji, you are still allowed a small tour through my new palace, but it is certainly going to be your last visit, as an ex-friend. As towards the deal about the Royal Throne, I am now forced to go through with it, and, in fact can show you a little *secret* about it.” With these words of treacherously intonated benevolence they walked towards the centre of the hall.

“This is the Hall of Statutes, and *there*, my gentleman, is the Throne!” The men were energetically stepping forward, followed by two sentries. King Hamid rose upon a pedestal, and sat down on a large golden chair with two lion heads staring at his guests. “What do you think?”

“That is unmistakably the Throne of Midas, Majesty,” said Richard.

“Wrong!” said King Hamid. “It’s a replica of gilded wood... guess why!”

“The original is too valuable, obviously, Sire,” said Richard.

“Partly true, but the original is also too *heavy*!”

“Too heavy, Sire?” Richard stammered.

“First of all, I don’t see how the old Throne could ever be carried up here without damage: you would need a fork lifter for it. In fact, I wouldn’t mind having the original here, because no burglar can ever carry it off; not even *four* burglars!!” The King rose from his seat, with a broad smile on his face. “But there is another reason! Come further, gentlemen... I will show you the original throne. You may give your opinion.”

Before they knew, they were marching down some stairs into a cellar. Arriving at a stainless steel metal door, one of the guards produced a set of keys, and entered a number code into a keypad. Michael and Richard turned their heads and looked at the ceiling, as a sign that they were not here to glean access codes. Then the guard took out one key and inserted it in a nearby lock. Hereafter, King Hamid produced a second key from his pocket, and inserted it into a second lock. When they simultaneously turned the keys, the metal door opened instantly.

“Come through here,” King Hamid said in a subdued voice, as if they were entering a holy shrine. He raised his left hand towards the guards, who remained both standing at the entrance. The room they entered was clearly some sort of museum, although evidently intended solely for the royal household. There were showcases full of artwork, gems and golden objects, crowns, helmets, and swords. The King took post before a large corner shelf, and pointed out a golden helmet, of very fine craftsmanship. “This Thracian helmet you see here is the only object of which I’m pretty sure it must have come from Delphi: we have some historical data on this. It was donated by Democritus, as a votive offering when he visited the shrine.” Richard and Benji stared at it, and then at each other, and smiled; they were getting close! They walked further along a few other exhibits, when suddenly a large golden chair became visible. “This is the original throne of our family, gentleman. This is the treasure you are looking for.

Certainly the amount of gold in it is staggering: some eight hundred and fifty kilograms in all. Still the most interesting I have always found the lions. Please have a close look.” Hamid stood close to Richard and the King whispered: “*Don’t look at the eyes!*” Benji had already proceeded further and observed the piercing eyes of the two lions that were carved at the ends of the arm rests. One had red eyes, and the other green. They had an awe-inspiring gaze, and Benji was instantly mesmerised, and kept staring at them.

“It is almost as if they are alive, your majesty” said Richard, who looked in another direction. Hamid and Richard slowly walked away from the golden throne, leaving a hypnotised Benjamin Miller behind.

“Quite true! This is the second reason this chair isn’t used: at audiences they attract too much attention. In fact, they may quite well hypnotise my guests. This is, of course, a bit unpractical in affairs of state.”

“We weren’t aware of this characteristic,” said Richard. “What do you say, Sire: would you be willing to lend the throne to the Greek government?”

“Sure!” King Hamid said. “I’ll make up some sort of contract. Where are you staying?”

“Somewhere down town, in a small hotel.”

“Ah, you wouldn’t like to stay in a safer place? Al Zenhar Hotel is good. I can supply you with a room there, if you want.”

“I’m quite OK, Sire, really.”

After a small walk towards another corner, there was a large showcase containing the white skull of an animal, with a large amount of long golden hair attached to the backside. “This must be the Golden Fleece, as some of my family members believe it to be. However, the experts have attested that it is a forgery... from the Middle Ages.” After some more pacing through the museum, King Hamid and Richard arrived at the exit where the guards were still on their post.

“Well, that ends your visit for today then. I think I’ll invite the Greek Ambassador again. He will be happy to mediate in this mission, so I don’t have to trouble you with all the details. I’m unfortunately needed at a meeting now. So, my guards will see you out.”

“Thank you very much, your Majesty,” said Richard.

“No, it is me who should express thanks: the honour is all on my side. You saved my family from a scandal, you see. And I’m sure we will meet in Delphi, in the long queue,” King Hamid said.

“I have myself no questions for the oracle, Sire,” said Richard. “All my questions have been answered already.”

“Definitively another reason for me to adjust my views of the Scottish people!” King Hamid said with a little nod of appreciation.



## 10.

# The Pythia and the Tripod

☞ *Rubedo* ☞

*From the flooding darkness the son of the earth had brought, my soul gave me ancient things that pointed to the future. She gave me three things: The misery of war, the darkness of magic, and the gift of religion. If you are clever, you will understand that these things belong together. These three mean the unleashing of chaos, and its power, just as they also mean the binding of chaos. War is obvious and everybody sees it. Magic is dark and nobody sees it. Religion is still to come, but it will become evident.*

C. G. Jung  
*The Red Book*

### 1



he party had left early in the morning, having received words of encouragement and a formal blessing from Konstantinos. His advice in the matter of the oracle of Delphi had been pondered long, with Maria visiting his office for the rest of the night, but he condensed it in the short wish: “May you all find the *Light*.” They had received copies of the writings of Democritus, and some personal papers of Matheos were also handed over. Michael and Maria read them during the short drive to Al’Sabboura. Soon the *Bristol Gardens* were found again. They would be staying one night with Eric and Sylvia, but their hosts had been surprised to find their guests in a rather gloomy mood. They were reading John’s papers all the time, and had hardly eye or ear for anything else.

It was at evening dinner that Sylvia broke the silence: “Well, would it be inappropriate for me to inquire what has happened to you all? Has your quest ended badly?”

"That you could say, yes," Michael replied. "To quote Churchill, this has clearly become a riddle, wrapped up in a mystery, inside an enigma."

"Sorry for all the trouble," said Sheila, "but we've just lost somebody very dear to us, and found out things that are all quite confusing."

"Somebody has died?" asked Sylvia.

"Yes, my father. It seems he has lived in Damascus for ten years."

"But, but," Eric stammered, "didn't he die in Lockerbie?"

"No, evidently not. It was his brother Mathew who died there," Sheila started.

Maria lifted her hand, and said: "I'm all to blame. I'm utterly sorry. I have to excuse myself for all the lies."

"Lies? What lies?" asked Marco.

Looking at Marco Maria started: "About me and Jorge for a start. I owe you an explanation... To start with the less burdening news, I can inform you all that I seem to have a daughter." Everybody looked dumbfounded and Marco dropped his fork.

"A daughter? What's this now?" he stammered.

"I only found out yesterday," said Maria.

"Who is she then?" asked Marco.

"It's Monica, my faithful piano pupil. I already recognised some traits in her, but then I didn't know. I have been an unhappy wench, but now I have seen everything as things really are, and I'm relieved."

"You've never been an unhappy wench!" said Marco.

"Please tell us, Maria," said Sheila, "Nothing can be so terrible that we wouldn't understand it. Is it about your miscarriage?"

"Yes, but what I told you a few months ago was only what I knew *then*. Now it seems things turned out quite differently in the end."

"Come on Maria!" said Marco laying his hand on her shoulder. "Out with it; it's not any use to keep it all propped up."

"Well, as I told Sheila a little while ago, it is really so that in 1999 I got pregnant from Jorge. We were happily awaiting the baby, but then

something went wrong. In May 2000, the day before my 45<sup>th</sup> birthday, I slipped on the staircase and I got a spontaneous abortion, the baby suddenly got born a month before its appointed time. Jorge was holding the baby in his hands, all bloody and lifeless, a tiny, helpless figure. He said that it must be a punishment. It was then that I learned he had a mistress...”

“My poor girl!” said Marco.

“I got so mad! I scolded him, called him names and shouted: *Get out of my sight! Pack your bags and GO!* He got all white and left the room with the little one. I staggered out of the bedroom, and took a shower... as strange as it may sound, in my weak state. After I had calmed down and recovered a bit, I was wondering where Jorge had gone, and with a dizzy head I went up to the tower to see if he was in the garden, maybe digging a small grave for the child. I felt already worried that I had been too harsh, with all kinds of confused, unrealistic thoughts rambling through my mind, realizing that I couldn’t actually kick him out of his own house, and would have to call an ambulance or so. Then... well... I saw him standing at the cliff. The frail body he had wrapped up in a large white cloth... and then I saw him topple over, and I must have passed out. I awoke on the carpet the next morning.”

“Well,” Sheila stammered, “That’s what you told me on my last visit. Quite a shock, of course, to hear that... Still, I gathered it was good for you to get it off your chest.”

“Also an *oaf*, that Jorge,” said Marco. “To tell you he has somebody else, just after you having had a miscarriage!”

“But he felt very guilty, it was utterly consuming him already for a long time,” said Maria.

“Maybe so, but why do you feel suddenly so understanding towards him?” Marco asked.

“It is when you see everything and feel everything *yourself*,” said Maria.

“So you mean to say that you know something new in the matter now?” asked Sheila.

“Yes, in my dream I saw two people walking along a beach, a young couple, Madeirans. They had planned to have an evening swim, but instead they heard a baby crying somewhere. Then they found the little thing, all wrapped up in a white swathing, floating in the water. They were at first very disturbed, and started to look around where the parents were. Instead, the husband found the body of a man in the water, nearby a cliff. He summoned to his wife to take the baby home, and he promised to deal with the police. As I understood, they had been anxiously trying to get children, but weren’t able to. Now they got a child by a strange stroke of fate. *My child!*”

“But Maria dear,” asked Marco, “How did you actually get away with it all? Weren’t there any people who knew you were pregnant? You said you were already in your eighth month!”

“Having a child in your mid-forties is quite an ordeal, and I didn’t feel like shouting it all from the roofs, but they knew at the hospital, of course, and Matheos knew. When it had all happened, I confided in him, and he promised to go to the hospital to see if he could do something.”

“Do what?” asked Marco.

“Well, it appeared that the physician who had conducted my regular check-ups had taken his notice, and the new doctor had not yet become acquainted with my files, so Matheos...”

“*Forged the hospital files?!*” Marco screamed.

“I know that to you, as an ex-police officer, this looks awfully serious, but...”

“John didn’t mention anything of this in his diary,” said Sheila.

“When your father died the other day, he mentioned this abortion business of my mother with a purpose. He said that if he would have been wrong, I wouldn’t have been here. He referred actually to two cases. He said at the time that I should try to see it all as an unfortunate accident.”

“*Accident?! ... and then wiping out the evidence?!?*” Marco cried.

Maria looked pleadingly at her husband. “I have been living with this so long, and have *never* been able to see it as an accident. I felt guilty for my foul tongue, but, as it seems, it really *was* an accident, and it seems to have had a happy ending... at least partly.”

Marco’s face cleared up slightly. He uttered a deep sigh, saying: “So you think it is *Monica?*”

“She is sixteen, and she is quite gifted... wouldn’t you say?” said Maria.

“She has been studying with you already for five years, and has an exceptional feeling for Chopin, sure, but aren’t you just guessing? Is this not a nervous shock, a reaction to... well... the whole quest,” said Marco.

“Dear Marco, I *know*... for *certain* ! I was already wondering about it at home that she had something of Jorge, and that her birthday was on the 24<sup>th</sup> of May.”

Everybody looked in awe at Maria, after her sudden confessions. A long silence ensued, everybody slowly eating and drinking again.

“There is a more serious matter,” Maria said. Marco looked worried again, wondering what would be coming next. “It wasn’t the first time that birth certificates were forged. My mother did the same with me. As I’ve already informed Michael, I was born not in Birmingham, but in Greece.”

“In Delphi, at the site of the temple of Apollo,” Michael appended.

A long silence ensued, everybody staring at Maria. Clearly everybody suddenly realized that the mission was from that point onwards entirely in her hands.

## 2

After dinner and a short night’s rest, time had come already to say goodbye to the undaunted Simmons family. Early in the morning the illustrious party had driven back to Beirut, undisturbed this time by hikers. After returning the army truck to the UN outpost in Beirut, they walked to the

harbour to relocate the Emily. There they found Richard sitting on a chair on the deck at the stern taking sun.

“Howdy, Richard!” said Michael. “How long have you been here?”

“Long enough to see the baby safely delivered,” he said. “The throne of Midas is on the way. King Hamid has taken immediate action, and is travelling to Delphi himself to see what is going on. His enthusiasm for the quest has even spread to other countries.”

“Great! I think we should now lift the anchor and get on the way, but first we need to do some shopping.”

“No need!” said Richard. “I’ve taken more than enough food to get us to Crete.”

“Well, that should be OK then,” said Pierce.

They all embarked, and the party was now at least slightly more complete, although Gillian and Dorothea were still absent.

“Where is inspector Miller?” asked Marco.

“Unfortunately, he has been detained.” said Richard. “He is still enjoying the royal treasury in Gordianum, behind closed doors. By the way, I’ve heard some rumours that there has been a minor earthquake at Delphi, and as a result nobody dares to enter the temple site. There is a terrible smell of sulphur all around the place.”

“Well, we know who is spouting that odour around,” said Michael.

Without further delay the Emily left the harbour, and started the trip on the diesel engine. Later in the day a suitable southern breeze took them speedily in the direction of Crete. In the early evening of the next day they had safely arrived at the harbour of Elounda, in the shelter of the Spinalonga peninsula. At the time of Democritus, the city was quite large and known as Olous, a powerful centre of trade with its own King. Nowadays it is a standard tourist village, and it was the idea of Michael to stop at “*The Ferryman*” for some dinner and wine. In the morning some further shopping for the next stage of the trip was made, and sail was raised towards Itea. By boat they had to circle the whole of Arcadia, and

pass from the gulf of Patras into the gulf of Corinth, which took in all three days. It was still a question whether the high masts of the old schooner could pass safely under the new Rio-Antirrio bridge, but at the sheer sight of the huge columns of the cable supported bridge, Michael found it was a piece of cake.

After this stage, Itea harbour was reached in a few hours, and the explorers settled in a small hotel, which Richard had pointed out. At the reception Richard inquired whether Hamid al-Yassin Al-Mahbet Al-Etcetera had arrived, and he was informed that indeed such a person had been registered, under exactly that name. It appeared that the venerable King had left a note for Richard, saying, *‘Will see you and your clan this evening in the hotel bar at eight, if it is convenient. Your’s Hamid.’*

Thus, it was agreed that everybody would retreat until the evening, when they would meet the venerable King of Phrygia. As it turned out, Hamid was not easily spotted among the crowd, because he had put on a simple t-shirt and jeans, and he wore sunglasses even in the evening in the shady bar. In this outfit nobody would guess he was the ruler of the richest, but also smallest kingdom in the world. Richard, however, recognised him, and introduced him extensively to his comrades. In the hotel bar, late in the evening a lively discussion ensued.

“I was happily surprised, when I heard the news that Delphi was going to be fully restored,” he said. “How on earth did you ever get into such an endeavour?”

“It was pure chance, Sire,” said Richard.

“Please, just call me Hamid, otherwise people will become suspicious. We really should open a few bottles of Dom Perignon for this occasion!” He beckoned for the waiter and instantly ordered champagne for all.

“I’m not sure what to believe anymore,” said Hamid. “Is it really wise to return to those old supernatural, pagan ideas?”

“Console yourselves that supernatural things are never what they appear to be, Sire,” said Maria, who was keeping a respectful tone.

“How are we going to conduct our business there, when all these noxious gases are around the place?” asked Hamid. “I’ve just returned from the renovated temple site when they installed our throne in the Corinthian hall. It was terrible! The *beat*, the *smell* ! The whole place even *looks* terrible, despite all the treasures, which are flowing in from all sides of the world,” the monarch complained.

“It is all part of the stage,” said Maria.

Two gracious bottles of Dom Perignon were soon brought in by the waiters, and after being popped open and glasses distributed, King Hamid rose and addressed the party: “Dear friends! We all have gathered here to celebrate a remarkable day: the return of the legendary oracle of Delphi. May it be worth the trouble, and bless the world with a new period of enlightenment!”

“Hear, hear!” said Pierce, raising his glass.

“Quite so,” said Maria, “and what does Your Majesty want to get out of the Oracle?”

“What everybody wants: important advice in matters of state, of course,” replied Hamid. “Truly, many of my royal friends and connections in other countries have also donated heavily to Delphi, in the hope for divine counsel. Do you know already who is going to be the priestess... the Pythia?”

“I will be,” said Maria.

“YOU?!” the king exclaimed.

“Sure, is that so surprising?”

“But you’re a mere *pianist*!” said Hamid.

“And, what about it?” Maria defied.

“Do you even speak Greek?” Hamid asked.

“No.”

“Have you been a priestess before?”

“No, I was organist in a Catholic church.”

“But... that won’t do at all!” Hamid objected.



“We do not need to split hairs about this matter, Sire,” said Maria.  
“The only real problem is that Pytho has returned to Delphi.”

“Pytho was the adversary of Apollo, wasn’t he?” asked Hamid.

“Yes, Sire,” Maria replied.

“How come he’s back?” Hamid asked.

“By revival, augmentation and strengthening, a thing one of us has been able to accomplish, although quite unintentionally.”

“Who?” asked Hamid.

“I, Sire,” said Michael.

“This sounds all very dangerous. Would that mean that he has to be driven out of Delphi again?”

“Quite so,” said Maria.

“And you think you are up to this, Ma’am?”

“I think I will manage.”

“But how?”

“By persuasion, Sire.”

“So... you think you are able to converse with the *devil*?” asked Hamid.

“Pytho is not the devil, Sire. Rather his most important ally.”

“Aren’t you putting yourself at tremendous risk?”

“Maybe, I’m not sure about that. Anyway, after neutralizing Pytho the oracular process should be peanuts.”

“*Peanuts*!? Are you playing the fool with me Ma’am?”

“Ever heard of geomancy, sire?”

“Oh, yes, that is well-known in Arabia, but surely that was not exercised in Delphi.”

“Well, that remains to be seen. It seems plausible that the oracular process was brought into Egypt through Hermes Trismegistus, who received his knowledge from Confucius. He probably adapted it somehow for his own purposes, and this method of divination then spread first to Greece, where it came to be used in the temples. Hereafter it entered the Arabic world in a slightly adapted form. For instance, there is still an

interesting 13<sup>th</sup> century geomancy instrument on exhibit in the British Museum that originally came from Damascus, and the figures it produces have a striking resemblance to the hexagrams of the *I Ching*, the Chinese book of changes.”

Up to this point the members of the expedition had been quietly following the dialogue, but at this point Michael’s amazement got the better of him. “Do you sincerely mean the I Ching was the basis of the divine oracles of ancient Greece?” he asked.

“I have some reason to believe so, yes,” said Maria.

“But... *dad* used the I Ching,” Sheila remarked.

“Yes, and Matheos learned me to use it,” said Maria. “This was one the missing links from Damascus.”

“So you intend to use the *I Ching* in Delphi?” Hamid asked.

“Indeed, by lack of better, it seems that the Chinese have to help us out again. So, my task shall be merely to throw the coins or dice, and then I provide the text belonging to the hexagram that comes up. The interpreter then does the rest.”

“I don’t believe it will work,” said Hamid, shaking his head with a little smile, as if it all was a great farce.

“Let’s put it to the test then,” said Maria.

“Well... I suppose we could give it a try. What do I have to do?” asked Hamid.

“Write your question on a piece of paper, and turn it around,” Maria prompted. “Of course you write in plain English, so that we can read your question afterwards.”

Michael produced a piece of paper and a pen from his pocket, and Hamid scribbled quickly in a very luscious handwriting. Maria fished a black book out of her handbag, and produced three large wooden dice. “Please, Sire. Throw these six times, so that we can deduce the signs related to your question.”

After turning his paper upside down on the table, Hamid threw the dice carefully. Maria explained: “The first result is: 2 – 2 – 4, this gives a Six. When using dices, I always count an even number as *two* and an uneven number as *three*. Six means the *old Yin*, which is a changing line, Yin turning into Yang. On a paper she drew the sign ‘—x—’. The next throw of the dice produced the numbers 3 – 4 – 6. Maria said: “this gives a total of seven, which means a Yang.” She drew a straight line on top of the first one. Then Hamid threw again four times, and during this Maria had drawn the following figure:



“Well... looks interesting, but what does it *mean*?” asked Hamid.

“We have here hexagram number 28, *Ta Kuo*, which stands for *Prevalence of the Great*. Two of the lines are moving lines, which turns it into hexagram number 1, *Ch'ien*, or *The Creative*. The texts that go with it are: ‘*The lake rises above the trees: The image of Prevalence of the Great. Thus the superior man, when he stands alone, is unconcerned, and if he has to renounce the world, He is undaunted.*’ This means that you are living in extraordinary times, such as when there is a flood. However, the Noble Man stands alone and is free of care like the firm tree, because he knows these conditions are only temporary.”

“Well, I say!” Hamid exclaimed.

“We aren’t ready yet,” said Maria. “There are two special conditions the oracle wants to draw our attention to. A Six at the beginning means: *To spread white rushes underneath. No blame.* This means the following: In extraordinary times, one needs to be extra cautious to undertake an important task, just as when placing a heavy thing on the floor, one takes

care to put rushes under it, so that nothing will break. It may seem a bit exaggerated, but it is not a mistake.”

“Well, that sounds quite in line with my question,” said Hamid.

“Then there is the second special condition that the oracle raises: A Six at the top means: *One must go through the water. It goes over one's head. Misfortune. No blame.* This looks more serious, because here the oracle says that the unfavourable times have reached a climax, and have become so dangerous that unusual courage is needed to accomplish one's task. The water rises over one's head, and one faces misfortune. But there is no blame in giving up one's life for a good cause. There are things that are more important than life.”

“Ah, I see,” Hamid mumbled silently. “Is that all? Does it say what the outcome will be?”

“Yes, the final hexagram is number 1, the *Creative*, which is one of the best signs in the whole book. The final judgment is: *The Creative works sublime success, furthering through perseverance.* I think this needs little explanation. It seems you are on the right road to solving the problem already, but only need perseverance, no change of course. However, it may cost you your life.”

“But that is *extraordinary!*” Hamid exclaimed. He lifted the little note paper from the desk and gave it to Maria. She read aloud: “*The opposition in Gordianum has been growing strong. I have chosen to keep my patience and negotiate with my opponents, despite warnings of my advisors. Will this work out?* Well, Sire, it seems that the oracle wants to strengthen you in your endeavours, such that you may not make the mistake that Bashar al-Assad had made, and many other rulers for that matter.”

“Ah, yes, let's hope for the best...” King Hamid sighed, “But maybe this was good luck. Am I allowed a second question?”

“Sure, Sire,” said Maria.

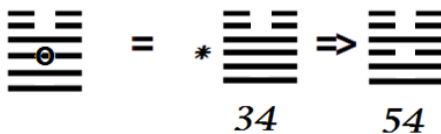
“This time I will keep the question to myself. Is that allowed?”

“Of course!” said Maria.

“I throw again then?” Hamid asked.

Maria nodded and said: “Please, but act slowly, and concentrate on the question.”

Hamid threw the dice six times, and evidently was somewhat tense of what would be the outcome. Maria had again drawn a figure:



She then explained the following: “The first sign is that of the *Power of the Great*, saying: ‘*Thus the superior man does not tread upon paths that are not in accordance with the established order.*’ I think this speaks for itself. Next we have the old Yang on the third line saying: ‘*The inferior man works through power. The superior man does not act thus. To continue is dangerous. A goat butts against a hedge and gets its horns entangled.*’ This clearly implies a very dangerous situation, of which one must withdraw very carefully,” Maria explained. “The final judgment is: *the Marrying Maiden. Undertakings bring misfortune. Nothing that would be beneficial.* The explanation of this sign is that *a woman who is taken into the family, but not as the chief wife, must behave with special caution and reserve. She must not take it upon herself to supplant the mistress of the house, for that would mean disorder and lead to untenable relationships.*”

Hamid rose briskly from his seat, his champagne glass dropping on the floor, smashing into a thousand pieces. “IMPOSSIBLE!!” he exclaimed. There he stood quite out of control, slightly wavering. He pointed his finger to Maria and shouted: “You... you... *WITCH!*” It was then that he became aware that everybody in the bar was staring at him and that his anonymity might be in jeopardy. Thus, he decided to retreat. Hurriedly he stepped out of the room and into the elevator. King Hamid had been clearly outwitted by ancient Chinese philosophy, and everyone sitting around the table displayed a minor grin of schadenfreude.

“Well done, Maria!” Richard enthused. “Any idea what his question was?”

“After his response, I could make an educated guess. I feel sorry for him, and only hope he will not end his days as King Birendra did.”

“We’ll have to look this one up, Maria,” said Pierce.

“On the other hand,” said Michael, “If he keeps to the counsel, he may well be saved from two impending dangers.”

“Quite so! I propose that, with already one clear victory in hand, we might drink to the Pythia,” said Sheila.

Everybody raised his glass and cheered: “To the Pythia!”

### 3

The stay in the comfy hotel, however, had to be kept short. Maria had been pestered with insomnia since her ‘temple sleep’ in Damascus and had written a long letter during the night, letting her husband comfortably snore in the too soft double bed, which he had occupied nearly all for himself. Then she had decided to have a peaceful breakfast in the early morning, and had a pleasant surprise when King Hamid approached her and requested if he could join her.

“By all means, Your Majesty,” she said, “if you don’t shout.”

“I’ll be as meek as a lamb, Ma’am. It’s not my habit to have breakfast all alone in such a strange place. Didn’t sleep all too well,” he complained.

“I neither,” Maria nodded.

“Worries about the coming tasks, perhaps?” said Hamid.

“Indeed, Sire,” said Maria.

“After last evening’s revelations, I think I’d better step down from the throne, and pass the kingdom to my brother Bandir.”

Maria almost nearly dropped her coffee cup. “Are you sure about this, Sire?”

“I’ve seen enough in the countries around me not to understand the implications of the counsel that was given.”

There was a long silence during which both peacefully ate breakfast and sipped the delicious coffee.

“You may be pleased to hear that I have lent the original throne of Midas to Delphi, and I also returned the helmet of Democritus, and some other precious objects that were originally from Delphi. One of my forefathers was among the bounty hunters that sacked the temple site at Delphi, something I found out only a few days ago.”

“Well,” said Maria, “there must have been a lot of those bounty hunters when the Romans put the place to ruins.”

“Yes. Anyway, I hope you will manage with the eternal serpent. May God give you strength!” he said.

He was about to leave, when Maria said: “Thank you for your concern. He has briefed me about the situation.”

“What do you mean?” Hamid looked as if he was to explode again.

“Not quite God, but at least his right hand man has given me ample instruction. An omnipotent adversary he is, our serpent.”

“You must be quite *mad*!” Hamid stammered.

“Stupid, foolish, mad... it is all of no consequence. God is God regardless of what we think. Uriel, even in his lower position, is already quite beyond words. Your forebears should have listened better to your precious prophet, Montanus. He was advised by Uriel in critical times.”

“Have you, perhaps, secretly studied on the matter?” asked Hamid, trying to find an explanation for Maria’s surprising words, and thinking that she after all could be a shrewd deceiver.

“No, I am a mere pianist, as you said.”

“Well... Uhm...” Hamid stammered, not quite able to make up his mind. “Will you come and play for me one day?”

“With pleasure, Hamid, but make sure to read the papers of Montanus, which have been stacked away in your treasury for much too long.”

“I’ll do that,” Hamid replied. He slowly rose, thinking that she might have heard this piece of knowledge from Richard. However, he realized

that the books of Montanus were not on display in the treasury, but were kept hidden in a large chest, and Richard had not even been near it. Thus realizing that Maria knew things that were unknown to outsiders, he put his hand on her black hair, and said: "Allah is great! That is all we know." Then he left.

Maria finished breakfast and wandered out of the Hotel to the beach, where she found a vacant sun chair. She was soon joined by Michael, who had not slept well either. He was intent on taking a refreshing walk along the beach, but had spotted Maria.

"Good morning!" he cheered.

"Oh, hello, Michael!" Maria said. "Come and sit down and enjoy the sunrise!"

Michael sat down, but he didn't say a word. They beheld the sun creeping up between the hills in the direction of Delphi. "Sun rises in Elysium," Michael said.

"What do you mean with that?" said Maria.

"Just a loose thought."

"Ah!" Maria sighed. "Neither Elysium nor Shambhala I'm afraid. More the opposite of where I might be going today."

"You know what's going to happen there, don't you?"

"Yes, and No," said Maria.

"Have I done much harm?" asked Michael.

Maria smiled, and said: "Yes... and No."

"Maria, for heaven's sake!" said Michael. He was getting truly annoyed by her evasiveness.

"Exactly, Michael, for *Heaven's Sake* ! That is exactly what it is all about. It is all going to be as ordained. In the end all will be well. That is what I know."

"But how can you know what is ordained? *Nobody* knows that."

"I didn't say that I know what is going to happen. Will you please do me two favours, Michael?"



“I would do *anything* for you, you know that.”

Maria reached for her handbag, and after some fumbling she lifted an envelope out of the routine paraphernalia. “When Monica has reached the age of eighteen, will you see to it that this is delivered to her?”

“You mean...”

“Just in case, Michael,” said Maria.

“You *do* know what is going to happen, don’t you?”

“In great lines, yes, but not in detail. The outcome is still open.”

“OK.” Michael nodded, and waving the letter in the air he asked: “but why not Marco?”

“I cannot leave this to Marco. This is something for Monica’s eyes only. She is the only one entitled to know the *whole* truth about her relatives.”

”Then I promise I will seek her out when she has celebrated her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, and deliver this letter to her. What was the other favour?”

“That when I go into the Temple, you will do *exactly* as I say. Not complying will cause a catastrophe beyond imagination.”

Michael’s throat fell dry, and he was unable to speak a single word.

“You will keep this a secret, won’t you?” Maria asked. Michael nodded affirmatively. He had tears in his eyes and did his best not to start sobbing.

“You really don’t have to worry about me,” said Maria, seeing his distress. “There are a few things Pytho doesn’t know, and, as I said in Syria, He is going to be dealt with by higher powers.”

Michael was now informed about everything. They both rose and walked along the beach, in close embrace.

#### 4

The meeting with Ioannis Diamantopolis was already scheduled for noon. There was only a strange problem: the organizer had been kept largely in the dark about the real proceedings that the members of the inner circle had in mind at the newly resurrected temple site. As the official restorer, Ioannis had been quite surprised that suddenly so much new artefacts had

been brought to Delphi in addition to the ones that they had brought in from the Greek museums. Still, he had not realized that the donators wanted something in return: dire counsel in questions of state, security and marriage. Ioannis neither knew that some of the treasures were only on loan and heavily insured. Some of the treasures, however, looked rather strange and out of place. When he arrived promptly at twelve o'clock, he asked for Richard McGregor, but was tapped on the shoulder by Michael.

"You are Ioannis Diamantopolis?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. You are mister McGregor?"

"No, I'm Michael Willmore, but we'll all be here in a minute," he said.

"How many of you are there?" Ioannis asked.

"We are with six. Richard McGregor, Marco and Maria Ferraris, Pierce Farnell, and then there is me and my wife, Sheila."

"Mister McGregor rang me and said that there was a slight possibility that there was going to be a new priesthood installed in Delphi, and that it might mean that the oracle would be operating as it did in ancient times. That is *absurd!* Where are then the five *hosioi*, the *prophetai* and the *Pythia*?" he then asked.

Michael waved his hands defensively. "No, no, unfortunately our situation has changed. One of the persons who might have known more has died, and now Pytho has returned. That's what we know." At this point all other members of the expedition had arrived and were listening in on the conversation.

"Pytho has to be expelled, but that cannot be accomplished by mortals," said Ioannis.

"I suppose we should brief you about the matter, but things are a bit complicated, and we would appreciate your help to get the Pythia ready for office this afternoon." Michael laid his hand on Maria's shoulder to indicate she was to be the new priestess.

“Happy to oblige, but nobody can enter the temple of Apollo at the moment. There are noxious gasses all around. You wouldn’t stand two minutes there.”

“I recently ran into a similar situation,” said Michael. “In the end it wasn’t too bad, even without a gas mask.”

“What you request is quite strange, but you are evidently determined to go there, despite all warnings.”

“There is much at stake, sir,” said Michael.

“These fumes were there in ancient times too,” said Ioannis. “They gave the priestess the ability to foresee the future. It is known she could only stand them for a limited time. Priestesses even died as a result of too much inhalation.”

“I don’t see any danger, sir,” said Maria. “I’m well prepared for the situation.”

“There are some things I don’t understand. What is the role of this big trunk? This is not something belonging to Delphi.”

“The trunk is actually a coffin, sir. It contains the remains of a being that is tied up with Pytho in some way,” said Richard.

“All very irregular,” said Ioannis. “Also the tripod you brought is not the one we would recognise as original. It looks more as an altar of some sort. We have found a better copy and put it in the *Adyton* instead.”

Michael glimpsed questioningly in Maria’s direction. “That is quite in order, sir,” said Maria.

“Pytho guarded the *Navel of the World*, and if you are all intent on expelling him, I cannot be involved. In spite of being the curator I cannot be held responsible for what will happen. Even if you are successful, I don’t believe you will be able to attract the messenger of the Gods to administer the oracles. There is also the *promanteia* to be considered, the rights for outsiders to be eligible to receive the prophesies.”

“I think we’ll proceed one step at the time, sir,” said Michael.

Ioannis’ sighed and he didn’t utter another word.

“Good!” said Richard. “Then we should be on our way!”

After checking out of the hotel, a taxi bus was hired to bring the party, including Ioannis, to Delphi. The final stage of the quest was now before them. After passing Chrisso, a meandering road was taken through the valley of Phocis towards Mount Parnassus. They first passed through the village of Delfi, and when the archaeological museum came in sight, the driver stopped and refused to bring them any further. “I’ll be waiting for you in the Museum,” he said, lighting a cigarette and stepping out demonstratively.

Thus, the seven persons were forced to step down the road for half a mile before the scattered white buildings of the restored temple site of Delphi came into full sight. It was clear that much work had been done there, but the air was extremely hot and damp, and soon they could hardly breathe. Richard mumbled that after all it wouldn’t be a good idea, a statement that was promptly endorsed by Ioannis. Michael and Maria, however, were not dissuaded. “Now that we’ve come all the way, better get on with it. It’s my mess, and we are to clean it up,” Michael said. Pierce and Marco agreed.

They got off the road and entered the site of the Athenian treasury, a building that had needed least restoration, but further along the *Sacred Way* the large temple of Apollo rose before them. Outside a large black altar came in sight. The first place they were off to was the *Castalian Spring*, where Maria, assisted by Sheila, immersed herself. Hereafter, she donned the white clothes, which were given to her by Sheila, and donned a neat crown of laurel leaves. They returned to the large black altar stone outside the temple of Apollo where all the others were waiting.

“OK guys!” said Maria, “I will go in now, and when I don’t come out in exactly twenty minutes, you come and save me... All right?” For Michael these words caused a strange feeling of déjà vu.

Maria stepped inside the main hall of the temple. It was spacious, but more barren, quite a contrast to the treasuries, which were stuffed up till

the ceilings with precious artefacts. The air was lighter, however, not at all as choking as outside. It was a huge hall, and she stopped a while to look around. There were sizeable statues of the Greek Gods, and it made her recollect the great authority, boundless tenderness and wisdom of Uriel, the Guardian of Eden, and His final advice to her in helping to avert the impending End of Time: “... *Just be your natural self, but be on your guard! Be clever! Give him the impression you’re a willing subject. By appealing to his vanity he will take only that what is rightfully his own - and not more than that - but give him only limited time. We will do the rest. Take courage!*”

Maria approached a heavy bronze door at the end of the hall, and slowly opened it. She had reached the inner temple, the *Adyton*, the *Holy of Holies*, the seat of the Pythia. There was a beam of sunlight impending from an aperture in the ceiling onto a silver statue of an Ibis, and in the middle stood the tripod with its golden legs. It was quite high, almost five feet, and although it was not the triangular altar that had been brought over from Madeira, it was quite impressive, certainly the kind of object over which Heracles could have been fighting. It was placed over a large crack in the floor from which some water vapour emerged and a sweet scent. They had also placed the huge trunk of Mnemosyne in one corner. Pytho, however, was luring in the deep, and waiting for his prey.

Maria climbed onto the large seat of the tripod. She sat there waiting for a while, inhaling the sweet fumes from below. She was soon carried off into a sleep-like trance. Then she heard a voice.

“So, you have come,” it said.

“Of course,” said Maria.

“Why *of course*? Are you not free to choose?”

“Yes, and I have chosen.”

“So you know I have come to claim my inheritance?” the voice said.

“An inheritance of which you are the fairest part.”

“Yes, I know. I have got the word.”

“Still, you keep your friends outside and instruct them to save you, when the moment comes?”

“Well,” said Maria, “We are supposed to say such things, even against all odds.”

“You humans are so very, very predictable,” the voice said slowly and menacingly.

“Ah, so you have been able to see all this mess on our planet, and believe it to be in concordance with your predictions?”

“Well, at least I’ve always thought that the Lord of Light was a little naïve in illuminating such a weak, mortal race.”

“Is this what Lucifer told you? Didn’t you find *any* surprises on your short sojourn through our World on the fingers of our brave little men?”

“No! They deceive themselves every day. They think thus, and act so, they hear this, and speak so; they think they are clever, with all their inventions, but in the end they are the mere products and slaves of their weak mind and their historical legacy. They are minor and of no importance.”

“Pitty! I hope you won’t mind that I disagree. But then you look at these things from an entirely different perspective.”

“When I see here in this desolate place a woman of great esteem, fully eligible to take up the duty of the Pythia, it surely makes me wonder why you have preferred the company of those trivial men. *That* at least is a surprise.”

“You surely are a flatterer.”

“I only see you are not afraid, and that you are a true and pure Pythia, and that deserves respect.”

“So, you insist on claiming the inheritance, promised to you? Lucifer is a sly deceiver. I would have put my trust rather in another member of the Heavenly Rulers.”

“I’ve made my choice from their ranks, and am content with my portion. And I must be content: Delphi looks quite as it was in the Old

Days, and you have even found the chest of the Covenant. You must have been informed well.”

“It was Democritus.”

“That sly, little bugger,” the voice said, almost angrily. “The Old Pythia surely delayed my plan, when she put me inside the chest. I couldn’t wriggle out of that trap easily.”

“Indeed, it must have been difficult to claim an inheritance of which you had been made yourself a part. Anyway, my friend liberated you, and now you have been fully restored. Do you not feel happy now?”

“Yes, I am grateful. Still, your friend suspected me. Investigating me in strange boxes under a strange light, and finally putting me into lead. I was a bit surprised. Still, lead is only food to me.”

“Well, it seems you have already confessed to *two* surprises. When you were travelling the world on a human finger, have you not been able to run into more wonders?”

“Do not try to outwit me, you little wench!!” the voice suddenly cried in great fury. “*Omne genus daemoniorum caecorum, claudorum sive confusorum, attendite iussum meorum et vocationem verborum!*<sup>1</sup> Soon you will be wriggling in the underworld!”

“Surely, you don’t have to be angry and start lecturing me in Latin. This language is as obsolete as your petty inheritance,” Maria retorted.

“Obsolete, petty? What do you mean?” the voice asked.

“It is highly outdated. The High One has made a *new* Covenant with Men,” said Maria.

“Really? How on Earth!?” the Serpent exclaimed.

“He holds the Holy Seeds, not you. I planted them in my garden, and they have sprouted.”

“Really now... How fortunate for the Human Race,” the voice said softly. “It is of no consequence to you and me. *Heis theós estin anarchos,*

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<sup>1</sup> “Every type of demon, blind, lame or mad, mark the command and the call of my words.”

*hypermegéthaes, agénaetos*.<sup>2</sup> Maybe it is so, but I remind you that also I am immense at the other ends of time! In the beginning of the Aeon I embraced the whole Universe and kept it warm. When it hatched it grew. Still, I am as big as I ever was, and at the end of this Aeon I will again hold the Universe in my warm embrace and brood on the next.”

“The immensely tight embrace of gravity, I gather, but have you not noticed that in those Men, which you call minor and of no importance, there is also a whole Universe? Didn’t you learn *anything* from them?”

“I learnt only speech, in the early days Egyptian, Greek and Latin, and now Spanish, French and English. Loose and trifling thoughts I picked up, no more. So full of ignorance, fear, vanity, cynicism they are, these words. ‘*Vae, Portae Inferi oculus aspicit nos tenebrarius tenebris*’<sup>3</sup> they wail unrelentingly. Humans are beyond redemption.”

“So, you don’t believe in the new Covenant then? It was forged in the time you were tied up to the Holy Seeds.”

“If that is a fact, so let it be. Something left in stall for Mankind... I for myself am content with my old inheritance, which – did you hear me well? – includes *you*, the last Pythia!”

“I will not struggle, not even complain, if you leave my friends in peace,” said Maria.

“You are a brave woman, I must admit,” the voice said, and then he carried on in a lower intonation: “Truly, Tartarus is not at all like anything the Greeks imagined. The Heavenly Rulers and even the Lord of Light have very little to say in my realm, but that doesn’t mean it is a dreadful place. No, it is a beautiful realm of metals, crystals, colours, shapes, in endless variations and patterns, truly a world of treasure and art. Is that not the sort of thing you women fall for?”

“Maybe. I will have to take you on your word and see for myself. So, what will you do with your precious hoard?”

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<sup>2</sup> “A god is, without beginning, immense, unformed.”

<sup>3</sup> “Woe, the dark eye looks upon us at the gates of the underworld.”



“*Chonensó gar hapanta kai eis katharón dialexó,*”<sup>4</sup> the voice said.

“High time we got rid of all this old stuff,” said Maria.

“Well... I have to give the humans at least credit for their good sense of humour,” the Eternal Serpent said.

“You’d better get on with it,” said Maria, “My friends have limited patience.”

Outside in the hot sunshine the other members of the party had waited for fifteen minutes. Ioannis had walked already back to the taxi bus, and Pierce had three times uttered the desire to go after Maria, and save her from her noxious predicament.

Michael had rebuked strongly, constantly looking at his watch. “She said *twenty* minutes, Pierce.”

Still, all were counting the seconds with rising tension. Then, it happened. The earth started to tremble and then to quake violently, large scissions appeared everywhere in the ground. The whole party fell to the ground, and they could barely rise to their feet. Before their eyes the whole temple site collapsed and clouds of dust and smoke rose from the chasms in the ground. Within two minutes all the buildings, so carefully restored, had disappeared in the depths together with all their treasures. The only spot that remained unscathed was the black altar that had stood outside the temple of Apollo around which the remaining members of the quest found themselves, marooned on an uninhabited island in the midst of a sea of destruction.

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<sup>4</sup> “I will melt everything down and purify it.”

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## Epilogue

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*The Hall of Thrones*

## 11. The Cairns

☞ *Conjunctio* ☞

*Above all, prophesy must be avoided, it is not the historian's business, even if he disguises it as extrapolation from past trends. To indulge in it may have a temporary and didactic usefulness in clarifying thought, but often only because the exercise demonstrates that the trend logically cannot continue. The number of scientists in the world, for instance, like annual expenditure on science, cannot increase at the rate of the last couple of centuries; if it did the population of the world would within a finite time consist of nothing but scientists. ...*

*J. M. Roberts  
History of the World (1990)*

### 1

On a very hot and sunny day in mid July 2018, Monica had walked from the distant bus stop along Muirkirk road. She had first passed the Boghead quarry and Nether Wellwood cottage and was stepping further in the direction of the village of Muirkirk. With still a few miles to go she paced along the road in a spirited and inquisitive mood. For her this journey was all very exciting and new, and now she was already getting a bit nervous to meet those people she had never met before, but who evidently had known her mother quite well. When the large farmstead of Entryhead came in sight in the distance, she apprehended that she should already be quite near the unobtrusive turn to the right that should lead her to the final destination. Soon she found a wooden sign pointing to the place where she had to be, a farmhouse with the name “The Cairns”. It was a bumpy, untidy road that led up to the house, likely not frequently used by cars. After half a kilometre she arrived at a neat farmhouse, and the wooden

sign confirmed she had arrived at the right address. She rang the bell, but nobody answered. Slightly surprised she decided to walk on. She knew that the river Ayr should be nearby, and she crossed a large, very well kept green. She reached the wild, little stream, and was surprised to find a jetty with two benches on it. Although they looked very old, they were still sturdy enough to invite her to sit down and enjoy the scenery. She took her mobile phone from her handbag, and made a few pictures, sniffed the air. *'They're probably just out doing shopping,'* she pondered.

A few minutes had passed when she heard a cracking sound, and saw a small, white ball flying through the air. It landed in the water near the jetty. She rose and looked down into the stream to confirm her impression. It was, indeed, a golf ball, and there appeared to be not only one but a whole collection of similar balls gleaming on the bottom. She wondered where they could have come from, because she had not noticed anybody on the open green, and was unsure from where exactly the sound had come.

"Howdy!" a voice said from a nearby group of trees behind her. Monica turned around and saw a roundish, short man with a white cap and a red face approaching her. "You must be Monica," he said.

"Yes!... and you are Michael Willmore?"

"In person, and... at your service, Miss da Silva."

"I was just enjoying the scenery, when you upset it with a golf ball," she said teasingly.

"An old distraction," said Michael.

"This is an interesting spot," said Monica. "I suppose you can catch salmon here."

"At the right time, yes, but we mainly swim amongst them."

"SWIM?! In such a little stream? With such a vortex?"

"Oh, yes! Particularly with *this* weather," said Michael.

They walked across the lawn. "Had a safe trip?" Michael queried politely.

“Fine, yes. Takes a little time with all those trains and busses. The scenery is nice though.”

Michael studied her features, and concluded they clearly resembled Maria's. Monica had an energetic stride, and took in the surroundings with interest. “Let's go inside and get you installed, shall we?” Michael said invitingly.

“Great! Thank you for receiving me.”

“Don't have to thank me for that, Monica. We are, as it seems, family.”

“Yes... Weird... Suddenly to find out that I have relatives so far abroad.”

“Must be, yes. Sorry to hear you travelled to the wrong place first.”

“Well, that was no great deal. I had to be in Bristol anyway. Nice place this Inn, the Prancing Pony. When I asked for you, the proprietor said you had moved out with your wife, and he gave me your phone number. Still, I had a beer and one of those famous pies.”

“Yes, we have decided to move back to Muirkirk. Long story. What other business did you have in Bristol?”

“Enrolling into University,” Monica said with an air of pride.

“Oh? You are going to studying there?”

“Yes. Palaeontology.”

“Well, well, I say. That's not every girl's subject nowadays.”

“I always have been interested in that subject from an early age on. You are a chemist, I heard.”

“Was, was. Then I was an innkeeper, and now I'm on early retirement,” said Michael. They had reached the house, and Michael opened the side door into the kitchen where Sandy, the young Border Collie, came to welcome them. “Sheila is still doing some shopping in Cumnock, but I guess she should be coming soon,” Michael said. “Come further. I'll show you your room.”

“Thanks, I'm a bit tired from the long walk, but I should be OK shortly,” Monica sighed.

Thus she was shown into the little guest room upstairs, and Michael let her acclimatise for a while. He went downstairs and embarked on cleaning the kitchen. Also he briefly popped into the drawing room where he collected the newspaper from the floor, which Sandy had torn into small shreds.

A little hour later Sheila came in with two shopping bags. “Never guess what I’ve found,” she said. “Asparagus! And the most exquisite red deer tenderloin from Skye. I think I’ll make a good soup, and then a tasty dinner for our guest.”

“She has arrived already,” said Michael.

“Oh, what a shame.”

“I was just hitting the ball when I spotted her at the riverside.”

“How does she impress you?”

“A clever girl, and... just as pretty as you were when we met.”

“Hmm... you mean to say I’m not so comely anymore.”

“For your age, you’re still the prettiest in the Republic of Scotland, I’m sure.”

Sheila was busy unpacking and didn’t react to his utterings. “Is Pierce coming with Gillian?” she asked.

“They rang they won’t make it today, but they will manage tomorrow at noon.”

“OK, let’s have the soup underway.”

Michael made himself useful in the kitchen by further cleaning up the dishes, while Sheila was unpacking all the stuff she had bought.

“As if President Charles Kennedy is coming,” Michael jested.

“Well, we don’t have to restrain ourselves now, do we?”

“I suppose so.”

The flavour of the soup had risen up to the next floor, and Monica had awoken from her little nap. She had taken two small parcels from her rucksack, a few presents from Madeira, and stepped down the stairs into the kitchen.

When Sheila saw her, she said “Oh, hello!” and directly stepped towards her and gave her a warm hug. “Gosh, you indeed look quite like your mother. I’m Sheila, your distant aunt. Are you hungry?”

“Oh, I could use a little bite, yes,” said Monica. “Here... I’ve brought you a few souvenirs.”

Michael had risen from the sofa, and took one of the packages. “Thank you. You shouldn’t have bothered. Come and sit down here,” he said, pointing in the direction of the old wooden sofa, which he had repaired already for the third time. They sat down and Michael had opened the package and found there a wooden ball.

“They are 3D-puzzles... You know?” said Monica. Michael looked at it from all sides, but then Monica took it and in a wink of an eye she had taken it apart into a dozen pieces, which she spread out on the glass table before the sofa.

“Oh, that one!” Michael enthused. “We’ve had those at home when we were small... Is this sandalwood?” he asked.

“Yes, my father makes them,” Monica said. Sheila had a similar package, just a wooden cube. It was made of the same wood, with a nice unguent scent.

“Better not take this one apart, because I won’t get it back together again,” Sheila said, and then pointed to the table, all arranged for luncheon. “Let’s have a bit of soup and sandwiches, shall we?”

“Great,” Monica said.

They all sat down and ate a while. Michael broke the silence. “How are the Madeirans doing nowadays?” he asked.

“The island is getting a bit isolated, and many of the rich and famous have left, but as a positive result the Madeiran people are finding themselves back. Still, I have decided to move out. Come and live in England for a while,” Monica explained.

“She’s going to study in Bristol,” Michael said to Sheila.

“Oh. What subject?”

“Palaeontology,” Monica said.

“Oh, how original! I suppose archaeology also belongs to it?” Sheila asked.

“We should have some courses of those in the first year, yes.”

“Lots of archaeology to see here,” said Sheila.

“When we met many years ago, Sheila showed me around the moors in this area, and all the cairns and ruins. It made a lasting impression,” said Michael.

“Maybe we can make a walk?” Monica suggested.

“Sure! There is of course one particular cairn you should see,” said Sheila. “The one where your grandfather is buried. It has also a plaque dedicated to your mother.”

“Ah, yes,” said Monica. “So my mother died in Delphi, and was never found?”

“No, dear. We decided to commemorate her in this way, near to her father,” said Sheila.

“I suppose you read Maria’s letter, the one I posted to you?” said Michael.

“Yes, it came as a surprise, although not as a *total* surprise. On my birthday my mother told me in confidence that I was... well... a foundling. It all sounded so strange. I was actually quite angry to my parents, because I thought they could have told me a little bit earlier. Still they didn’t quite know for certain whose child I was. They knew about Jorge’s death, which everybody gossiped about that it was suicide, but they couldn’t be sure I was his child. There was no trace in the hospital records that Maria had been pregnant, so they decided I was an abandoned child, and... well... I have to say they have been the best of parents.”

“Luckily,” said Sheila.

“Then I got Maria’s letter a few weeks later, and I was both shocked and relieved... that is relieved, because I knew her so well, and she was so full of praise to me and encouraging, but I was also shocked, because it



was a horrible letter for most of it. Maria had had a terrible youth, and I still don't quite know why she decided to confide to me all those things, which are so very personal."

"About her mother?" asked Michael.

"Yes, my grandmother must have led a most unruly life. Not that she was a prostitute, but she had many lovers, and Maria had to put up with them. They also moved nearly each year to a new home, because of troubles with unpaid rent, and..."

"We don't really want to know the contents of the letter, but is there anything..." Michael started.

"I burnt the letter and rather try to forget it. In the end she asked me to send her love... to you both... and particularly to Michael. *'He shouldn't feel guilty,'* she wrote."

Michael looked down at this soup. "I think I should visit the men's room for a while," he said. He abruptly rose from the table, spurted up the stairs and disappeared out of sight.

"Oh, dear," said Monica. "Did I strike a weak spot?"

"Yes, yes, but I think it will do him good," said Sheila.

After a while, Michael came back with a red face, and a faint odour of aftershave. He resumed his soup. "Sorry for that," he said.

"What *nice* things did she write?" asked Sheila.

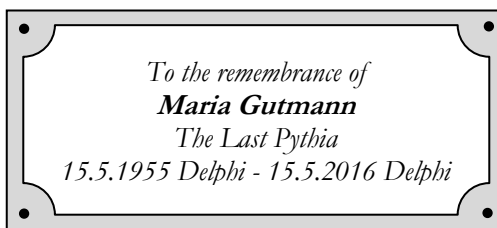
"Oh, that she always had such a great time with her piano students, for instance. They were for her a great relief, particularly when they made all these funny mistakes with the music. She urged me to go on playing, even only for my own ears, *'but in all things follow your own heart'*, she wrote, *'despite every opinion'*. She also bid me to take up contact with you, so that you could tell me all you know. So then it was quite clear I had to come to Britain for a longer time."

"Well, that would make me very happy," said Sheila.

Michael made a grumbling sound, and when he had cleared his throat, he said: "Me too."

Lunch was finished, and Monica went upstairs to get dressed for an afternoon walk. Michael had retired upstairs in the old bedroom, but Sheila was very keen on showing Monica the surroundings.

Walking along the river Ayr they had crossed these small bridges, and the history of the Moor Kirk and the ‘Monks of Melrose’, the Covenanters, and the Cameronians were quickly reviewed. Finally, they had returned, and arrived at the Cairns nearby the river, where two years earlier John Armstrong alias Matheos Viglis had been buried beside his twin brother Mathew. There was also a bronze plaque, with the inscription:



“So she rests here under her maiden name,” said Monica. “I suppose it is now appropriate to put in a stone,” said Monica. “*Cuiridh mi clach air do chàrn*<sup>5</sup>, is it not so?”

“This is our tradition, as you seem to have realized,” said Sheila.

“I took this from the beach on which I was found. Not much more than lava stone... but anyway,” said Monica.

“Most appropriate,” said Sheila. “That sort of stone was clearly missing here, and you’ve carried it in your luggage all the way, a worthy tribute!”

Monica placed the grey, round stone amidst the other ones.

“In the time I was studying the piano with Maria, she mentioned Matheos Viglis a few times. He used to do small things for her when she needed a man about the house. She said that he had designed the organ of Sao Martinho, and that he played the organ himself quite well. In fact, she had overheard him when he was studying the *Symphonie Romane* of Widor.

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<sup>5</sup> “I’ll put a stone on your cairn.”

It is quite bizarre to realize that he was your father, and that he is now lying here, beside my grandfather.”

“There is still quite a lot we might tell about John, although less about Mathew... that is, if you want.”

“Well, that’s what I’m here for! Your husband, does he have something to do with my mother’s death?” asked Monica.

“He feels responsible, yes.”

“What actually happened there in Delphi?”

“Nobody knows. Officially it was an earthquake, but now vague reports are appearing that the whole temple site just disappeared into thin air.”

“Disappeared... without leaving a trace?”

“So it is written in the last reports, yes. The only thing we found at the time was an old mirror. Michael took it home as an odd sort of souvenir, but all the buildings with their treasures just couldn’t be found back. Maria was also gone... no trace to be found of her.”

“Awful... terrible!”

“Yeah, it’s also somewhat funny, because two years back the insurance companies were in big trouble! All those golden treasures were heavily insured. They got away with it though.”

“OK, but how does *Michael* feel?”

“It is difficult, because he was very attached to Maria, and they shared some secrets. After she died, he could not be consoled. For two years he has been scolding himself; even his bosom friend Pierce, who will visit us tomorrow, has been standing quite helpless. In the end he couldn’t face all the work in the Inn any longer... easily lost his temper with the customers. So, we sold the place and took an early retirement. We actually returned here only two weeks ago. Michael has been working here untiringly, even repaired some old furniture. It’s therapy for him. Now everything is nearly as it was when my parents were living here.”

Monica looked in the direction of the sun, which was hanging on the edge of a low hill. They stood a lengthy time silently staring at the

disorderly pile of stones, and then, at sunset, they returned to the house. After a four hours walk they went inside and started making dinner.

## 2

In the morning everybody was refreshed after a good night's sleep, and Monica was shown around the house. In the drawing room there were the old books of John, now intermingled with those of Michael and Sheila, rearranged in the old bookshelf. The old Blüthner piano was there, but most space was taken by a large Bechstein grand piano. Monica instantly recognised it: it was the instrument she had practised on in Maria's house back in Funchal. She instantly started playing by heart all the old pieces, mostly Chopin, which flowed out like spring water.

"This piano has been very well kept! Runs and sounds like a *dream*," Monica enthused.

Michael, who had been listening, said: "We had a piano technician come over. It's yours, by the way; Maria left it for you. Quite an inheritance, wouldn't you say?"

"I already thought so, yes," said Monica. "But for this I would need a huge living room!" she said.

"Sure. Maybe you should also know that you have inherited some of the revenues of Maria's house in Funchal. Marco has sold the estate a year ago, and he has kept a considerable share for you on a separate bank account. See it as a birthday present."

"Is it much?" asked Monica.

"With a year's rent on top, I suppose it is a considerable sum."

"Well, lucky me!" Monica enthused. She was still so young and lively, and she just started playing again with extra fervour. She went on for another hour, without any sheet music in front of her, but then the bell rang. Sandy barked, and ran off to the front door.

"I think Pierce and Gillian have finally arrived," said Michael." Monica rose from behind the piano and followed him.

The two persons on the doorstep were initially blocked by Sandy, who was always a bit overenthusiastic with guests. Michael lifted her out of the small corridor, and Pierce and Gillian hung up their coats. Monica was standing a bit further away, and Pierce stepped forward and immediately shook hands.

“Pierce Farnell,” he said, “You must be Monica.”

“Monica da Silva, yes... nice to meet you.”

Gillian just said: “Hello, I’m Gillian, Pierce’s add-on.”

Monica laughed cordially. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Oh... you’ll see,” said Gillian.

They had stepped into the kitchen, which was nearby, and Sheila was already putting on coffee. She first hugged Gillian and then Pierce. “Let’s sit here in this kitchen for a while, and have some coffee,” she said.

“It’s quite a walk, leaving our car at Entryhead ‘n all, Mike,” said Pierce. “You should get that trail in order.” They all stepped into the kitchen and sat down at the table.

“There’s an awful lot to be done here,” said Michael, “and I cannot do everything at once. Luckily its good weather, so you shouldn’t complain.”

“No, I suppose I shouldn’t. How do you like the place and your new contacts here in the Republic of Scotland, Miss Monica?” asked Pierce.

“Fine, yeah... It’s easy to get along with the Scots.”

“I suppose that’s politeness. I like the weather and landscape in Madeira much better,” said Pierce. “I have been a few summers in Funchal visiting Maria. We got along very well.”

“I think Maria mentioned you a few times. You played *quatre mains*, right?”

“Quite so, yes, and she used to be quite demanding too.”

“She called you the *walking Groves’ dictionary*.”

“Did she now? She must have taken that over from Sheila,” said Pierce.

“Oh, I see. Maria said it was a bad dictionary, because her English teacher Edna Iles wasn’t in it,” said Monica.

“Is that so? Gosh, what a disgrace,” said Pierce.

“You have something in common with Monica, Pierce: she just inherited a grand piano,” said Sheila.

“Oh, really?” said Pierce.

“Maria’s Bechstein just arrived here a week ago, and we’ve had it tuned and fixed,” said Michael.

“Great! Well, that’s a special instrument, that one. The one I got – that is already *ages* ago – was a very old Duo Art Steinway, which I had to repair with Michael,” said Pierce. “I wouldn’t be too enthusiastic about these old heirlooms, if I were you. They generally bring bad luck. My Steinway was finally sold to a museum.”

“But this instrument is as good as new, and I think it will bring back only *good* memories,” said Monica.

“Pierce had two aunts who pampered him,” said Sheila.

“These aunts of mine, indeed, they were the guardian angels of my youth, that’s for sure. First there was Julia, who died early, from whom I inherited the Duo-Art piano. But then there was Guinevere, or Aunt Ginny, who left me a whole country house.”

“Oh, but that is splendid,” said Monica.

“Yeah, well,” said Pierce, taking a sip of his coffee, “How shall I put it... As I said, Julia and Ginny were important in my youth. You always felt so secure in their presence. Even if you were just visiting for a week or so, and you didn’t see them directly for a whole day, you didn’t feel lonely. You know that feeling?”

“Yes, yes, I have a few nice aunts on Madeira too. They generally tend to spoil their nephews and nieces,” said Monica.

“Of course! I was their only nephew. When I was still in my teens, they used to arrange always these *soirees*, with lots of guests, which I faithfully attended. They organised them in turn in Portsmouth and in Worcester. Actually, they were very anxious to turn me into an actor.”

“Ah, and did you?”

“No, no, I was more in for chemistry, as Michael here, but then... You would never guess what a surprise it was for me to inherit this piano from Aunt Julia, when she died. It was a bit sad at least to play it or to run those piano rolls, being aware that Aunt Julia wasn’t there anymore to enjoy it.”

“Hmm, I see, yes,” Monica hummed.

“And then Aunt Ginny, when she died she left me her whole house... It’s called Manor’s Green... situated near Worchester.”

“Ah, the Worchester of the famous *Wooster sauce*,” said Monica.

“I don’t like that sauce,” said Pierce, “but that house of Aunt Ginny was always special... always. The scent all around the house, the peace and quiet, the geraniums in the veranda, the open door to the garden with the peacocks, teatime, the funny teapot. But then... after her death... to return to Manor’s Green, her being absent, and the peacocks gone, that was a bit distressing. The scent was still there, but not quite the same scent... the geraniums were gone. The garden door was open, but to a sad garden, and with teatime, the teapot was far less funny,” Pierce pictured.

“Do you know that Sibelius had two favourite aunts?” Michael suddenly interjected.

“No. Who were they?”

“Julia and Evelina. They also somewhat pampered him, and they must have greatly encouraged Sibelius’ musical development.”

“Hmm. Why do you mention this?”

“Because of the geraniums on the veranda and the tea. One of the biographies, which I’ve been reading, starts with it. I think I’ll just fetch it and read it to you. It might be edifying. Wait a while.”

Michael rose and rushed upstairs to the bedroom. Within a few minutes he had returned, opened a book, and read:

*When I shut my eyes I can picture in my mind a small town with barracks from the Swedish epoch. It is a late summer’s day between five and six in the afternoon some time during the 1820s. The sun is slowly sinking towards the horizon; an officer is visiting a family with two daughters, their mother and*

*brother, and it is obviously not his first visit. They have been enjoying themselves, reading novels, playing the piano; there are geraniums in the window and the house is an old-fashioned one of considerable style. Tea is served and afterwards the party breaks up; they are all fond of each other and there is an atmosphere of real friendship, perhaps love.'*

"It is a quote from Sibelius' diary... The author argues that it could well have passed as a scene from the domestic life of Sibelius' grandparents, where his grandmother is receiving an aristocratic guest. With aristocracy is not meant aristocracy-by-birth, but aristocracy-of-mind; the natural aristocracy of people who have sensibility and a view of life that ordinary people do not understand. Those were the people with whom Sibelius felt particularly at home. The main problem of Sibelius is the downfall of this natural aristocracy, and it isolated him towards the end of his long life. This alienation from an entire epoch has also been *your* problem, I believe... Do you get my point?" asked Michael.

"Yes, I get the point. So, you've been reading John's old books about Sibelius again?" asked Pierce.

"Yes, it is a nice pastime."

"I've stopped reading books about composers, Mike," said Pierce. "I have at least *quite* finished with Wagner," he continued. "He has definitely dropped from my list."

"How come? You were so fond of Wagner," Michael asked.

"I had just started to read the second part his autobiography, when Wagner mentioned the enormous stir that his article *Judaism in Music*, had caused in the newspapers. So, I was tempted to read it. Have you read it?"

"No, no, I can't say I have."

"Some places almost read like a Nazi-charter," Pierce sighed. "Can you imagine Wagner writing that *there is an involuntary repulsion possessed by us towards the nature and personality of the Jews.*"

"It was in that time not an uncommon attitude, Pierce," said Sheila. "You should read *Daniel Deronda*!"



“Yes, but even Richard Wagner was affected by it! He literally wrote that the Jews are ‘*incapable of any sort of artistic utterance of their essence!*’ that their attempts at making art bear the attributes of *coldness and indifference*, even *triviality and absurdity*, and that in the history of Modern Music the Judaic period was one of *final unproductivity, of stability gone to ruin.*”

“Well,” said Sheila, “during the famous *War of the Romantics* there were many composers and critics with a different view. Not everybody put the chaotic course music was taking on the account of the Jews.”

“Yes,” said Pierce, “Most prominently Liszt, whose words were always twisted to the opposite. It is strange though, that I didn’t get to this epistle of Wagner earlier. He particularly cracks down on Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer, and what does he say about Mendelssohn? That despite *all his talent, his fine and varied culture, his high and tender sense of honour, he was not able to produce even **one** work that would touch the heart, as we should naturally expect from Great Art.*”

“Mendelssohn was a bit rash, when he had dug up the St. Matthew’s Passion of Bach from under the dust,” Michael teased. “Stating in public that *an actor and a Jew has returned to the people this great work of Christianity...* That was prone to elicit some sort of reaction!”

“But Michael!” Pierce continued in an elevated voice, “Wagner’s earlier works are utterly Mendelssohnian in character, and what does he do in his last work, the Parsifal? He literally *quotes* a motto theme from Mendelssohn’s fifth symphony! The Tristan chords he took from earlier works of Liszt!”

“Ah... Did he now?!” asked Michael.

“Yes, and he must have done so quite on purpose, because it is so obvious. I mean, a piece from the Reformation Symphony in the Parsifal, a related subject wouldn’t you say? So, what does that make Mister Richard Wagner?”

“A plagiary scoundrel you mean? Maybe that would be a bit too strongly put. Composers always have this cross-fertilisation process, you

know,” Michael said with the obvious purpose of throwing an extra stick in the henhouse.

“Oh? Lending it all from the old myths, Wolfram von Eschenbach, and the contemporary philosopher Schopenhauer? No, I think Nietzsche saw through him... what a little, conservative hobgoblin he really was!”

Michael laughed cheerfully, and said: “Well, Pierce, now it even sounds as if you feel *betrayed*!”

“I do, I *do* feel betrayed!”

“Well, if the quotation is so obvious, I believe that Wagner may well have arrived at a more positive opinion about Mendelssohn in his later life, and had intentionally put that theme of the reformation symphony in the Parsifal. Was his last music drama not all about redemption and reconciliation? Maybe he was a little too proud to put it explicitly in the newspapers, self-centred as he was, and chose to express it in this more subtle fashion? Wouldn’t you agree?” Michael took an opportunity to blink an eye at Monica, when Pierce scooped a biscuit from the basket on the side of the table.

“Interesting theory, but...” Pierce mumbled with a piece of biscuit in his mouth.

“No, Pierce, I wouldn’t put it that way, that is, that Nietzsche *saw through* Wagner as you said. It was just because of the difference in attitude and character, and the ideals Wagner embodied. In the end it was just a clash of incompatible characters, no more.”

“Anyway, I’d rather turn my attention to a composer less... how shall I put it?... stained... like Sibelius.” Pierce lifted the book from the table, and started browsing through it. “Those Humoresques, which you played were interesting, Sheila.”

“Oh yes,” said Sheila, “to be considered among his best works.”

“I must warn you that there are four more volumes in a row, if you intend to start on that particular biography, and there are better and

shorter biographies nowadays. Do you know that some have proposed the theory that Sibelius was leaning towards Nazi doctrines?” said Michael.

“No! Really? I can hardly believe that,” said Pierce.

“Of course Sibelius and Wagner couldn’t have agreed with the concentration camps, but Sibelius did refuse to help out a Jewish colleague in need, and his teacher at the Helsinki Conservatoire was a notorious Wagnerian, and badly infected with the anti-Semitic virus. Let that be a warning. Anyway, I’m becoming quite sceptical of what they are all writing nowadays.”

“Well, Mike, as I’ve stopped reading composers’ biographies, I think you’re damn right. Maybe I should continue reading Nietzsche.”

“Sure, although I should warn you that he is a bit overshooting and even hysterical at times, his ideas about the decadence and decline of the West are interesting when looking at it from our perspective. Namely, the Western ideas are presently more upheld in the East. Particularly, Christianity is flourishing in China!”

“Well... I’ll give it some thought,” said Pierce.

“We are forgetting our guest,” said Sheila. “What do you think?”

“About what exactly?” Monica replied. “You suddenly threw a lot of heavy subjects on the table.”

“The course of development in Europe, to start with,” Pierce queried.

“Well, during the EU years people were evidently a bit overenthusiastic, but Europe has been quite well reconstructed. We should stop being so cynical.”

“Hmm,” said Pierce. “I suppose we’ve seen enough of the *Ruins of Athens*, and learned our lessons this time.”

“Yes, after the Korean Crisis and the civil war in Syria the world has managed without any wars already for two years. I think that’s a *very* good sign,” Monica added.

"I agree we should look forward. As you notice, Monica, friends do understand each other perfectly. I think we shall see a new Renaissance soon. Don't you think?"

Monica nodded, but still kept a glance of reserve. She was contemplating the matter, and said: "Unfortunately, regarding our consumerism there is still a long way to go. We're still living in *The Age of Stupid*, you know."

"That movie actually plagiarized Sibelius' music," said Michael.

"Really? What piece?" asked Pierce.

"The beginning of the symphonic poem *Luonnotar*," Michael said.

"You see, Monica," Gillian teased, "that the subject of consumerism falls badly with our men: they instantly divert the subject."

"So it seems to be," Monica laughed.

"Well," said Gillian, "Our young guest has spoken. Maybe we can now all stop theorising and get down to practice!"

As usual, she had in this the last word.

*The End*

